

Hope Springs Brings The Joy Of Horseback Riding To Those With Disabilities

By Francine Fulton

Children with developmental delays learn to follow instructions and improve their concentration skills. A person with physical disabilities sits up straighter and improves his or her muscle tone. People with emotional issues learn to express themselves and develop patience.

These are not miracles, but everyday goals that can be achieved at Hope Springs Equestrian Therapy, a nonprofit organization that offers horseback riding lessons to children and adults with a variety of mental, emotional and physical disabilities. Hope Springs was founded by Chester County resident Elena Shaffer, who learned that horseback riding is proven to provide both mental and physical benefits to the rider.

Hope Springs Equestrian Therapy opened its doors in the summer of 1997. With only 10 students, one horse and one full-time instructor, sessions were conducted at an outdoor horse ring near Spring City.

The organization continued to grow through the years and lessons are now offered at a larger facility located in Chester Springs. The Hope Springs "family" has grown to include four therapeutic riding instructors, five horses, three ponies and over 60 riders. Shaffer is still part of the organization as a member of the board of directors.

Hope Springs offers various learning programs, including equine-assisted therapy, a summer camp and a program for at-risk youth, including those who suffer from behavioral issues, attention deficit disorder, eating disorders and substance abuse, among other issues.

Equine-assisted therapy, according to acting director Sandy Kumpf, provides two primary benefits: emotional and mental growth, including enhanced self-confidence, self-esteem, communication skills and concentration; as well as physical improvements, such as increased strength, endurance, balance, flexibility and coordination.

"Sitting astride a walking horse stimulates the muscles used in walking, and for children who can't walk or adults who haven't walked in a long time, it is highly therapeutic," she said.

She noted that Hope Springs riders also learn how to be self-reliant. Most are fearful of riding a horse at first, but they emerge stronger and more self-confident after they learn to ride.

The newest program offered by Hope Springs is equine-facilitated learning, which is being offered in conjunction with local special needs schools. The program is for students who are at risk of failing in the traditional classroom.

As part of the program, Kumpf explained, the horse is actually used as member of a teaching team.

"Equine-facilitated learning is new for us," Kumpf said, noting that the students take lessons one day a week for two and a half hours. "The horse is used to teach a life skill. Today, we talked about relationships and what it is like to have a relationship and what it takes to be in a relationship. We talked about respect, responsibility and trust and developing a friendship with a horse."

Part of the weekly lesson also includes working in the barn, grooming the horse and learning to put on the saddle and other equipment. Kumpf said that the students learn how to groom horses, how to tack up, and how to recognize the various colors and breeds of horses.

Volunteers are a major part of the equine-assisted program and all of the programs offered at Hope Springs. The organization has approximately 35 volunteers of all ages and backgrounds, but more are needed.

Hope Springs volunteers perform a variety of horse-related tasks such as grooming the horses and assisting the riders.

"Volunteers help get the horses ready; they lead the horse or (they) become a side aide," Kumpf said, noting volunteers take part in a two-hour training session. "We have a lot of teens who come for their community service (graduation requirement)."

She noted that Hope Springs tries to schedule volunteers to work with the same riders each week to encourage trust and friendship between rider and volunteer.

Kumpf added that she and the other instructors have observed that therapeutic riding sessions provided at Hope Springs make a lasting difference in people's lives.

"Physically, mentally and emotionally challenged riders learn how to follow instructions. They learn balance and coordination and it helps build up muscle tone," she said. "They also get to experience the joy of riding."

For more information about Hope Springs, including volunteer opportunities, interested readers may call (610) 827-7001 or visit www.hope-springs.org.



Photo by Francine Fulton

Instructor Heather Kerner (left) and volunteer Faye Mallory prepare Tempest for his lesson with a young disabled rider at Hope Springs Equestrian Therapy, a nonprofit organization in Chester Springs that offers horseback riding lessons to children and adults with mental, emotional and physical disabilities.

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