

Horsin' Around



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The Urgent Care Center of Richmond Hill

Photos by Patti Todd

It has been said that “the outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man,” and, boy, do the people at Horsin’ Around know what that means. Established 11 years ago, with just three riders coming one night per week, the program now has over 36 riders on the schedule each week. Horsin’ Around is a non-profit, therapeutic riding program whose mission is “to enhance the development, both physically and mentally, of special needs individuals utilizing the unique assets provided by horseback riding and human interaction.” This amazing program is certified by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH International).

Horsin’ Around was the vision of Judy Clark, a registered nurse for 30 years and an avid horsewoman. She and Lanette Yeakley, a physical therapist at Backus Children’s Hospital, founded the program in September of 2000. The program currently utilizes six horses, due to the recent loss of Skipper, the program’s 32-year-old patriarch. These horses are not just any horses; they are “just the right” horses that were hand-picked and individually trained to be part of this very special team. “It’s so funny how these horses can sense when a person has a special need. They walk slower and pay attention, as if they know that what they are doing is important— and they love every minute of it,” explains Karrie Henry, who lives onsite to care for the horses. She also directs the day-to-day operations of the organization.

Emily Fromme, an 8 year-old girl from Richmond Hill, has been riding for about two years. She was diagnosed, at birth, with a disorder known as Arthrogyrosis, which limits the movements of her joints. She has excelled in the Horsin’ Around program and looks forward to her session each week. JoAnne Fromme, her mother explains that, “She has always had a passion for horses, but this has been a dream come true.” Emily has had remarkable improvement in her strength, posture and balance since beginning the program and has set a goal to “one day ride all by herself.” Emily is in third grade at Richmond Hill Elementary School.





AroundTown * equine therapy

When you enter the grounds of Horsin' Around, you immediately know you are in a very special place. Smiling volunteers in matching red T-shirts and name tags greet you, and their enthusiasm and passion is evident. There is a large arena, built by Boy Scout Troop 486 of Richmond Hill, that allows the program to continue rain or shine. Strict guidelines, however, dictate when the program must be rescheduled due to inclement weather. As riders arrive for their sessions, you can sense their eagerness and joy at being there. Watching them move throughout the course, you see them engage in different activity points where, based on their abilities, they may do things such as hit a ball overhead, pull rings from a tree and throw a basketball through a hoop – all while on horseback. Some riders who have learned to be more independent are able to go through cone obstacles. A custom-made ramp and platform allows the riders to mount and dismount the horses more easily. It also gives the volunteers and instructors better access to aiding the riders during this important and very dangerous time of each session. When the program started, they actually used two sets of steps from a mobile home before Judy Clark personally borrowed \$2,000 to build this special ramp. Amazingly, within six months of her leap of faith, there was an unexpected increase in donations that paid off the ramp loan.

Therapeutic riders have a wide range of special needs, but to qualify for the program, they must have a doctor's recommendation before being evaluated by a certified PATH instructor. Riders are scheduled on Tuesdays and Thursdays and come weekly for their 30-minute ride. Each program is tailored to meet the specific needs of each person, based on his or her strengths and weaknesses. Present each night alongside the PATH instructors, there are usually 15 to 20 volunteers who have undergone specialized training. On Thursday's, Becky West, a licensed Physical Therapist, is present to assist some of the riders with more complex physical limitations. Most volunteers have years of experience with horses and many have been with the program for a very long time. Jill Stanbury, a Richmond Hill resident and two-year volunteer explains, "This program has been a blessing, allowing me to use my experience with disabled individuals and my love for horses. It is amazing to see the joy that each rider experiences. Horses don't see disabilities. They do not judge. They want to be loved and treated with kindness. I think that's why these special riders love to come to



Horsin' Around." Jill is on her way to becoming PATH certified.

Thomas is one rider whom both Judy and Karrie share with me as we discuss the impact Horsin' Around has made on so many riders and their families' lives. Thomas began riding in 2001 when he was nine years old. He had been undergoing tradi-

tional Physical Therapy his entire life. Thomas was born with Spastic Quadriplegic Cerebral Palsy and, at the time of starting equine therapy, he was not able to sit unaided. According to Judy, who remembers it well, "After seven to nine sessions, he was all of a sudden sitting up all by himself." Before this, Thomas could not even sit on the edge of the bed without assistance, not even for a few minutes. What sounds like a minor accomplishment changed the quality of his life tremendously, as he was then able to do things he hadn't been able to before such as ride in the front seat of the car, eat with less difficulty and breathe with more ease. (Things that most of us take for granted each day). "We knew he was enjoying riding because although he is not verbal, he would grunt, smile and point," says Judy. His enthusiasm for riding continued and, within two years, he was able to hold the reins independently and turn the horse with one hand.

Before Thomas began riding, he would have to be put into a body cast each and every summer, because his legs would scissor as a result of spasticity or continuous muscle tightening. Since he began riding 10 years ago, he has not had to be put into a body cast at all! The way a horse moves is very similar to the way humans move, therefore riding builds core strength and promotes flexibility. The warmth the rider experiences from the horse is what aids in the person's flexibility.

Therapeutic riding is not limited to helping with just physical development. It is very effective in aiding with emotional development as well. Anthony is 10 years old and has a high-functioning form of Autism. His mom Jennifer explains, "This has given him an opportunity to work with animals that he otherwise would not have had. Over the last year of riding, we have seen his confidence and pride develop significantly. It means so much to him." Anthony is passionate about riding and has set a goal of riding in the Special Olympics next year! He often helps Karrie around the facility doing all kinds of various tasks.

As you can imagine, running such an outstanding program does not come cheap. Horsin' Around depends on the generosity of those who believe in the difference they are making in the lives of the rid-

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By John Anthony Davies

I saw a child who couldn't walk,
Sit on a horse, laugh and talk.
Then ride it through a field of daisies
And yet could not walk unaided.

I saw a child, no legs below,
Sit on a horse and make it go
Through wood of green
And places he had never been.

To sit and stare,
Except from a chair
I saw a child who could only crawl,
Mount a horse and sit up tall
Put it through degrees of paces,
And laugh at the wonder in our faces.

I saw a child born into strife,
Take up and hold the reins of life
And the same child was heard to say,
Thank God for showing me the way.

ers and their families every day. With a budget of \$60,000 a year that covers "just the basics," such as feeding and caring for the horses, safety equipment and insurance, the program has never charged anyone. Without a doubt, the people at Horsin' Around are making a difference in the lives they touch each and every day!

There are lots of ways to get involved, from sponsoring a horse to volunteering or just passing the word along about the amazing things being done at Horsin' Around. To find out more information about how you can make a donation, volunteer or if you know someone who may benefit from a therapeutic riding program, go to their website at www.HorsinAround.org. If you are interested in learning more about Hippotherapy, or therapeutic riding programs, more information can be found at www.pathintl.org. *

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