

Riding program boosts confidence and hope of handicapped

BY JOHN STOKES SCHMIDT
Staff Correspondent

WESTMINSTER, Md. — The Carroll County 4-H Handicapped Riding program, the first of its kind in Maryland, provides unique and encouraging therapy for people who are mentally and physically handicapped. Under the instruction of Lita Miller, of the Maryland S.P.C.A., volunteers provide the handicapped with new hope and confidence gained through contact with animals.

There are approximately 200 such programs nationwide with seven counties now active in Maryland. The Carroll County program began in 1979 with nine disabled riders and 27 volunteers. It now offers six, eight-week, one-hour lessons during the fall and spring for 125 disabled youth and 150 volunteers. Public and private support allows for this growth with donations from service clubs and community organizations.

The instructor is thoroughly



A group of handicapped students get a bridle demonstration from instructor Lita Miller.



Instructor Lita Miller of the Maryland S.P.C.A. at right, demonstrates hoof cleaning to some handicapped students.

trained and is an accomplished horsewoman with teaching experience. She trains volunteers, screens the horses as well as the students, and oversees the entire program in order to determine its success and special needs, and to monitor each student's progress.

The fact that these special students progress is undisputed. The horses often motivate the handicapped person more than any other form of therapy can. Children who won't speak to other people will often speak to the horses. They have a friend they can love and trust.

Increased verbalization is only one of the improvements so often observed. Riding improves attention span, relaxation of spastic muscles, balance and overall coordination, and, most importantly, it increases self esteem and confidence.

Amy Dietrich has been riding in

the program for six years. When she began, she couldn't sit up without help. Continued therapy has improved that greatly. The program is also good for non-walking children. There is a pony cart that can be driven from a wheelchair.

The Carroll County Farm Museum donates housing for this project and community enthusiasm is high. Howard Marsh, a retired truck driver and a volunteer for three years notes, "It gives you something to do and you feel like you're helping someone."

Establishing and maintaining a program like this requires substantial funding. Proper equipment and facilities are needed, and research is necessary to continue to measure the success of the therapy which occurs. Handicapped riding programs are trying to include more and more health professionals in their

project and Carroll County is no exception.

Bob Shirley, 4-H Extension Agent and one originator of the first Maryland program agrees. "The main goal is to provide a riding program that is both recreational and therapeutic to handicapped people."

To accomplish this, more physical therapists, attending physicians and other health care professionals must recognize the benefits. Karen Scott, a special education teacher and volunteer in Carroll County, was unaware of the program until viewing a handicapped riding demonstration at the Special Olympics one year. She immediately saw the value of therapeutic riding, for riders, side walkers and horse leaders alike. "Especially for the riders, it is a confidence builder and real variety for intellectually limited kids",

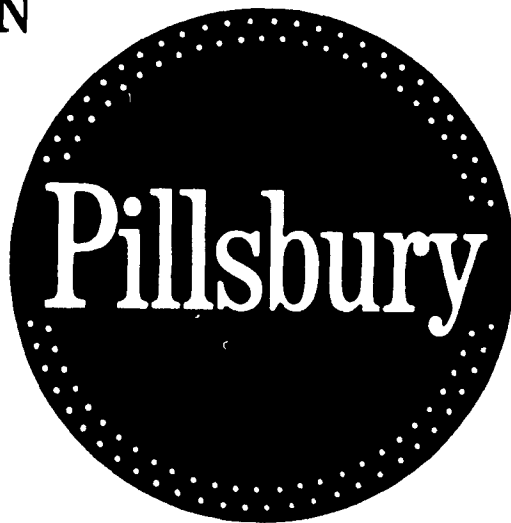
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