

Kids Korner

Mini-Horses Break Down Barriers In This 4-H Club

NEWARK, Del. — "You've got a purpose in life — to make people smile, boy," calls Genevieve ("Vivi") du Pont to her miniature horse, Toy Mint.

Settling into the seat of the horse-drawn cart, du Pont pauses to reassure the teenager beside her.

"You can hold my arm, that's OK," she tells her, as she clucks to Toy Mint. As the horse begins to pull the cart forward, the girl's face beams.

Riding in a horse-drawn cart is a rare treat for 18-year-old Vandy Huffman of Williamstown, N.J., who has cerebral palsy. And 4-H club leader du Pont knows it's one way to bring a smile to her face.

du Pont has been sharing her miniature horses on a regular basis with people with disabilities since she founded the Dilworth/Cozy Corner 4-H Club two years ago in Kenton, Del. 4-H is the youth organization of Cooperative Extension. Through the horses, du Pont provides opportunities for children and adults to transcend their problems.

"Many people who are physically and mentally challenged come here with low self-esteem," says du Pont. "Often their feelings get trapped in their bodies because they can't express themselves. These little horses do so much to help them. Caring for the animals helps them deal with their own emotions."

Du Pont's efforts were recognized when her Kent County 4-H club won high honors in the 1997 "Colgate Youth for America" campaign, a nationwide search for the best community projects by young Americans. The Dilworth/Cozy Corner 4-H Club took the fourth-place prize in the 24th annual campaign, competing against clubs and troops of six national youth organizations that included 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Girls Incorporated, and Boys and Girls Clubs.

"I was thrilled to win a prize," says du Pont. "I just try to make this club fun so that everybody leaves here happy with themselves."

Du Pont, 53, is no stranger to hardship. A rubella (German measles) baby, she was born 95 percent blind. She has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and diabetes. Two auto accidents injured her foot and her back so severely that she now relies on an electric wheelchair and a golf cart

to get around her 32-acre Kenton farm.

Cozy Corner, du Pont's fully handicapped-accessible farm, is a veritable menagerie. In addition to her 35 minature horses, she keeps company with two llamas, two goats, a donkey, a cow, 10 dogs (including a three-legged Doberman called Moose), a miniature flying squirrel and six talking birds. Du Pont breeds, raises, trains, sells and shows her miniature horses, which grow to only 34 inches tall at the shoulder.

"Miniature horses were originally bred in Europe for children of royal families," says du Pont. "Because of their strength, they were used in America in mines, where they pulled loads of up to 400 pounds. Now they are raised only for show. They are easy to handle and bond well with people."

Du Pont teaches her 4-H club members, with or without disabilities, to groom, handle, walk, and show the miniature horses. She even takes members with her to compete in regional and national shows, which only recently — thanks to her relentless campaigning — began to offer handicapped classes in competitions.

In addition to competing, members of the Dilworth/Cozy Corner 4-H Club go on field trips, participate in parades, and do community service projects such as taking the miniature horses to greet the residents of nursing homes.

"Some of the old folks in the homes haven't talked in years," she says. "But when they get near the horses, their eyes light up and they don't stop talking."

Ted Palmer, Kent County Extension agent for 4-H, calls du Pont an "outreach person."

"Vivi is very community-minded," says Palmer. "This summer, she invited the whole Kent County Cloverbud 4-H Camp to her farm for a tour. She's a wonderful role model."

Du Pont welcomes children and adults of all ages and abilities to her 4-H club.

"Mainly it's about getting abled and disabled people together so that they can learn to deal with people who are different from themselves," she says. "This club runs on love. Anybody can join."

"I probably get more out of it than the members do," she adds. "If I can't help somebody every day, I don't feel I've accomplished anything."



Vandy Huffman, 18, enjoys a cart ride behind a miniature horse at the Dilworth/Cozy Corner 4-H Club in Kenton, Del. From left, club leader Vivi du Pont, Vandy and Vandy's mother, Penny Huffman.

Smart Stuff

WITH TWIG WALKINGSTICK

What is El Niño?

Pay close attention to the weather forecast on TV tonight. Chances are you'll hear the forecaster refer to weather effects from El Niño — especially during the winter time.

An El Niño occurs when water in the Pacific Ocean warms. This phenomenon happens about every four years. The warm water around South America begins to evaporate and form clouds. This changes the air temperature and the winds above the water.

That might not seem like a big deal, but changes in temperatures can have really big effects. Air currents, and whether that air is warm or cold and moist or dry, along with the temperature of water, play a huge role in creating all of the different kinds of weather conditions that happen around the world.

In years when there is an El Niño, there usually are heavy rains along the coast of Florida, droughts in Australia, and warm mild winters in Alaska and Canada. Trade winds, or winds that blow in tropical regions, tend to blow faster during El Niño years. And because of the warmer water, massive numbers of fish die. Fish and ocean animals have to have the cold ocean water to survive.

So why the name El Niño? Fisherman gave it this name, which means The Little One in Spanish, not because it is little, but because they usually begin to see the effect right around Christmas when the birth of the Christ child is celebrated.

Scientifically yours,
Twig

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Have a question?
Send me E-mail
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Are you into it?

Hercules Arrives In Hershey

HERSHEY (Dauphin Co.) — The Feld Entertainment spectacular, "Disney On Ice — Hercules" arrives at the Hersheypark Arena Nov. 11-16.

The action-adventure epic will run for 11 shows. Music is by Oscar-winning composer Alan Menken and lyricist David Zippel.

Characters are voiced by Charlton Heston, James Woods, Rip Torn, Paul Shaffer, and Bobcat Goldthwait.

Tickets for the shows are \$35, \$19.50, \$17.50, and \$13.50. For tickets, call Hersheypark Arena Box Office, (717) 534-3911 or Ticketmaster, (717) 693-4100.