

Riding Program Provides Therapy For Disabled

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For children with handicaps, riding a horse gives them a chance to "be able to control an animal like that, because there's so many things they can't do, like baseball and basketball," said Rose Denlinger, riding instructor.

Denlinger, an instructor with the Lancaster County 4-H Therapeutic Riding Program, spoke to the Ephrata Area Young Farmers Association during a riding program Monday evening at Greystone Manor Stables in Leacock.

Denlinger spoke about the benefits of the program.

A four-year volunteer, Denlinger said the program includes nine instructors and about 30-40 different leaders, all volunteers. Riders, ranging in age from 4 to 80 years of age, are referred to the program by the Schreiber Pediatric Rehabilitation Center (formerly Easter Seals) of Lancaster County, the S. June Smith Center, Community Services Group, Coatesville Veterans Affairs Medical Center, doctors, and therapists.

The program, affiliated with but not funded by 4-H, relies on individual and organizational support — including its own fund-raising efforts — for money to operate.

People are allowed to ride at the stables unless a doctor indicates otherwise. There are about 60 riders enrolled in the program. About 40 different riders are handled per week, according to Denlinger.

In all, sessions are conducted in the spring, summer, and fall. One month — July — is set aside per year for vacation for the instructors and program participants, while the horses are still put through their paces.

The program was founded in 1980 in Mountville by Carol Henkel, instructor. The site was moved to Greystone Manor Stables about 11 years ago. Henkel, who spoke to the young farmers, said the program is funded at a cost of \$25,000-\$30,000. About a third of the cost is paid by the riders and two-thirds by the riding program. The costs cover boarding.

According to Denlinger, there are six horses involved in the program. Two are on full lease, the rest are owned by the program. The program, under the "umbrella," said Denlinger, of the county 4-H program, works with extension.

Denlinger, who volunteers about five hours per week, said that riders in the program can have a range of disabilities.

"Some are physical, some mental, and some are emotional," she said. The physical problems can range from mental retardation, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis to hunter syndrome (chemical disorders in the joints).

"We have a lot of Down Syndrome children," said Denlinger. One boy needs a helper arm and leg system because he was born deformed.

For each rider, a session lasts

once a week, for 45-60 minutes, for six weeks.

Kids who ride the horse enjoy the natural movement of "the horse's energy," said Denlinger. "They enjoy the warmth of the horse (those riding with bareback pads). The horse and the pads relax the kids."

She said, "They are thrilled with the experience. It's an adventure. And they get much-needed social interaction with the sidewalker, the leader, and the instructors."

The riders, of almost any age, are also taught riding lessons. They interact socially. They come in close contact with others.

The movement of the horse allows the children to sit up straight, which helps strengthen their muscles.

The father of one child in the program noted that for his son's therapy, he has seen the movement of the horse improve the strength and muscle tone of the child's limbs. The movement also stimulates range of motion and control.

Riding also increases feelings of self-confidence and self-worth.

But the riding experience is not confined to prominent physical disabilities. Denlinger also said that autistic children, even those with attention deficit disorder (ADD), allows them precious contact with the horse.

"The kids love their horses — they think it's their pony," she said. "One little boy kisses the pony on the nose every week."

One of those horses is Kojak, a 22-year-old Palomino pony. Kojak was donated to the program by the Ephrata Area Young Farmers. The horse has been involved with the program about 11 years.

Other horses include Deacon, an 18-year-old grade (mix) horse. Another is Josey, an 11-year-old registered Quarterhorse mare.

Last March, an auction was held to raise money for the program in Willow Street. The program raised \$3,000, about \$1,000 more than the previous year.

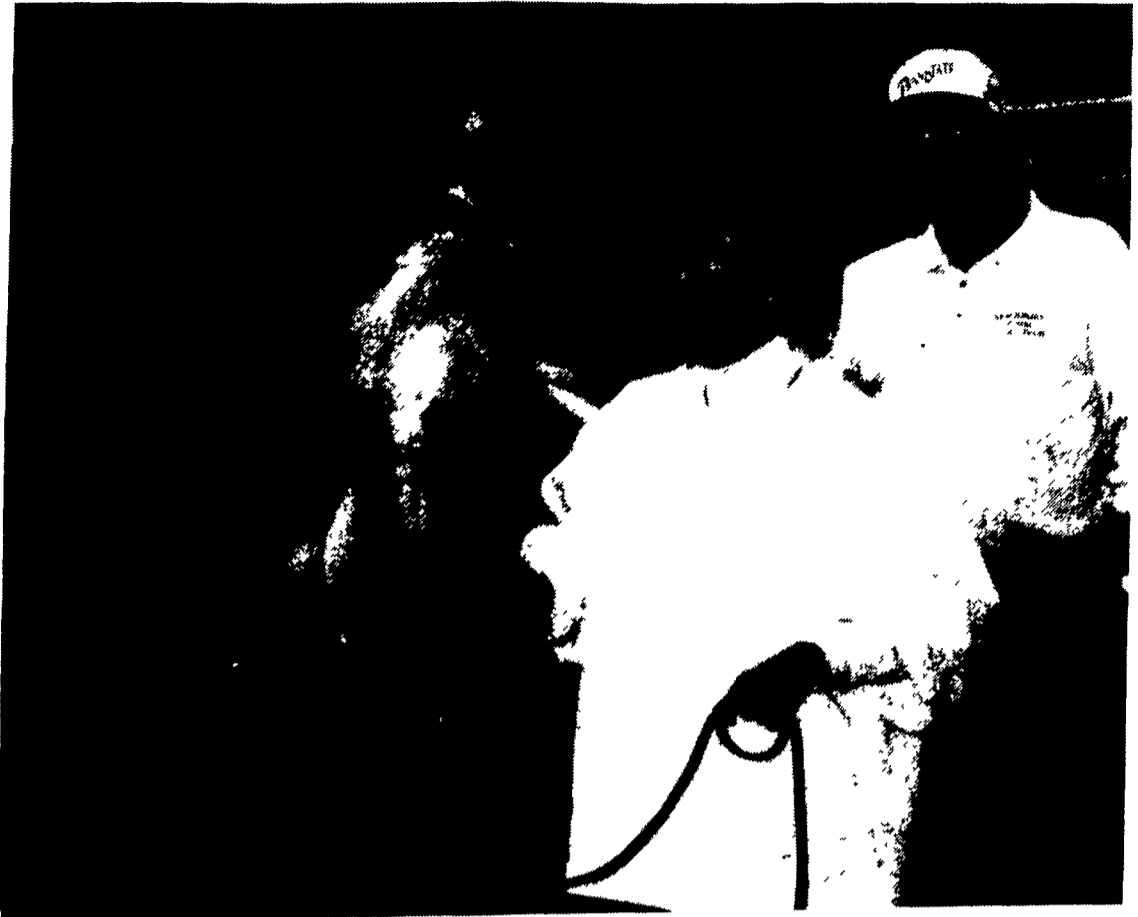
Denlinger pointed out that the new owners of the boarding stables, The Worship Center in Leola, will continue to operate the stables with no change. The purchase contract on the multi-acre site outlined that the farm must stay a boarding stable for five years.

The farm includes two large pasture fields and several smaller paddocks, Denlinger noted.

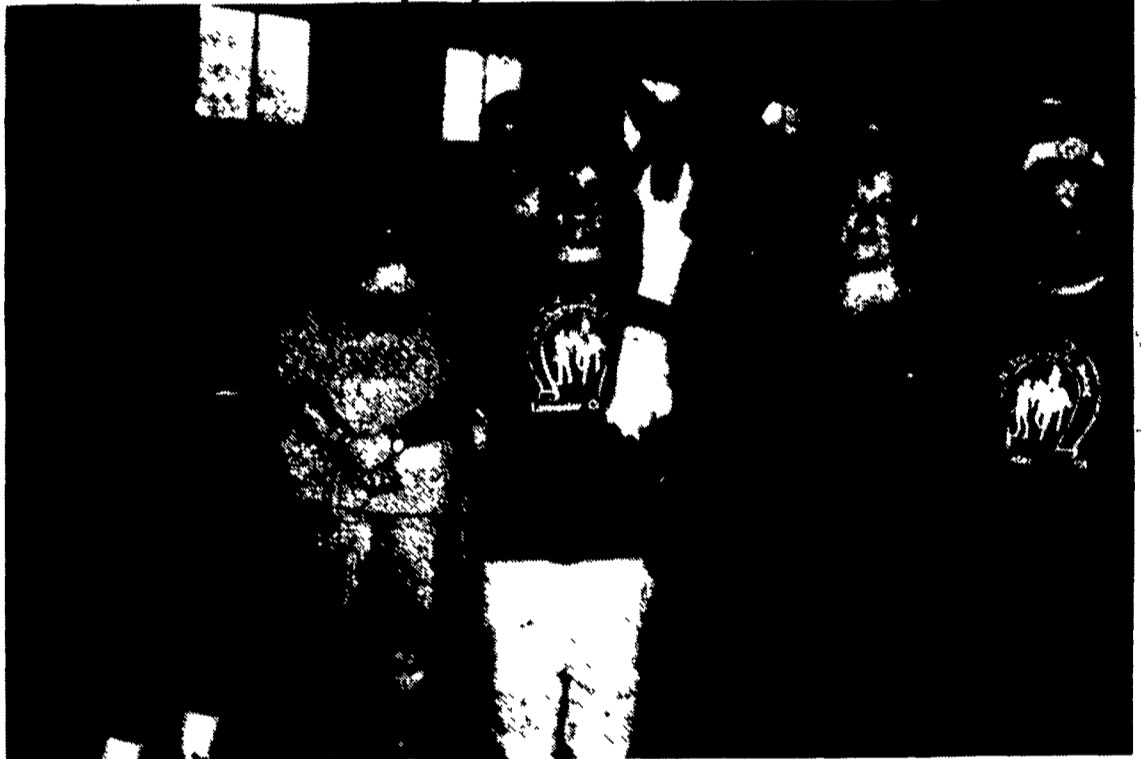
Volunteers for the program are always needed and may be leaders or sidewalkers. Leaders guide the horses during lessons and sidewalkers are responsible for the rider.

Each rider starts with one leader and two sidewalkers, so many volunteers are needed. Volunteers also groom and saddle horses for lessons. Training sessions are held periodically.

For more information, contact Rose Denlinger at (717) 786-4189 or Nancie Doyle at (717) 687-8547. To make a tax-deductible donation to the program, contact Lee Ann Ressler, treasurer, at (717) 299-2163.



Matthew Jennings, 5, rides Kojak, a 22-year-old Palomino pony. Kojak was donated to the Lancaster County 4-H Therapeutic Riding Program by the Ephrata Area Young Farmers. From left, Michelle Keiser, instructor; Matthew; Robin Pletz, leader; and Bill Wiltmer, sidewalker. Photo by Andy Andrews



Instructors in the 4-H therapeutic horse riding program with Deacon, an 18-year-old grade. From left, Luke Zimmerman, president of the Ephrata Area Young Farmers Association; Libby Craver, instructor and president of the club; Michelle Keiser; Ellen Barnes, head instructor; Denise Brubaker; Rose Denlinger; and Carol Henkel, founder of the program.



Sidewalkers and leaders with the program with Josey, a registered Quarterhorse. From left, Mike Brubaker, Ephrata Area Young Farmers Association; Barbara Anton; Victoria Miller; Robin Pletz; and Andrew Bunting.



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