THE HEALING HORSE

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GallopNYC

‘When I look out there, I don’t see a kid with disabilities’

BY JANIS BARTH

The note is written in a child’s hand, blocky letters in purple, red, yellow and blue magic marker. “Thank you GallopNYC!” it begins, the exclamation point dotted with a large purple heart.

Horseback riding to me is the funnest thing ever. You make it possible for anyone to experience it!

Love,
Joy♥


In them, the drawings and words, find the smiles and laughter of children who may have otherwise never spoken a word. Find the hugs, kisses and pats showered upon each horse; the difference made physically, socially and emotionally by these patient and gentle four-legged teachers.

And understand that here, on this dead-end street in Queens, is a place of new beginnings where the simple math of horse plus rider is the sum of hope.
M arley Whitaker is 17, and in her picture in the GallopNYC annual report, she sits centered in the saddle, reins in soft hands, thumbs property on top. She smiles, a teen and her horse. Whole. She is, the staff at GallopNYC say, a charming and enthusiastic young woman who has built a strong bond with their horses, especially her favorite, Buddy. She is the oldest of four adopted children and, for the first 11 years of her life, Marley was defined by her diagnosis: Autistic. Nonverbal. Impaired communication and social interaction. She started riding once a week at Gallop’s Forest Hills barn six years ago, and the arc of Marley’s life, says her mother Lisa Hahn, tears welling, has changed. “We’ve seen amazing progress in her focus, in her confidence,” said Hahn. “She has something she can call her own.”

Hahn said she worried the first time they brought Marley for a lesson. Most animals scared her. Dogs made her very upset. She was anxious and withdrawn. But, Hahn said, “when you have a child with a disability, a diagnosis like autism, you get desperate for opportunities.”

And so her mother braced the first time Marley got on a horse. She held her breath and waited and something happened. Call it magic.

“By the end of the second session she was petting the horse,” Hahn recalled. “When she knows she’s coming here, she says ‘Gallop, Gallop, Gallop.’ She’s more at peace when she gets off and, for us, because we sit here and watch with other families, we share their stories and help each other. It’s truly a community.”

Teaching children with disabilities to ride is an art and a science, with a system set out by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International. PATH was formed in 1969 in part to codify activities and therapies for individuals with special needs and to train instructors. At GallopNYC, all the instructors are PATH certified, assisted by a small village of volunteers who help by leading the horses and sidewalking with riders to help them stay balanced and secure in the saddle.

The program is progressive, teaching riding skills but also setting individualized goals with measureable improvements from walking and balance to focus and communication. Riding once a week, more than 75% of GallopNYC riders working on focus and attention showed improvement, said board President Suzy Marquard.

Count Marley in their number. When she started riding, Marley had a hard time following direction and needed both sidewalkers and someone to lead. Now, says her mother, tears threatening again, Marley rides around the indoor arena almost independently.

“When I look out there, I don’t see a kid with disabilities,” Hahn said. “I see a young lady, just riding a horse.”

T ake the Van Wyck Expressway toward Kennedy Airport, a nerve-busting slug of blaring horns and slamming brakes regardless of the day or time, and merge onto Jackie Robinson Parkway. Turn right onto 71A Avenue, then hang a left at the second cross street onto 70th Road, a quiet block of modest homes in the heart of Forest Hills.

GallopNYC sits on a small rectangle of land, a one-story stable in the shadow of a high rise. The program started in 2007 with a handful of horses and borrowed space. It is, today, New York City’s only therapeutic riding program, providing lessons to nearly 700 children and adults with developmental, emotional, social, and physical challenges. Nearly half are autistic. For some of those youngsters, the first words they speak is telling a GallopNYC horse to “walk on.”

“There’s a lot of need here,” said interim executive director James Wilson, a transplanted Texan with a ready smile and a riding résumé that includes roping. “There are 200,000 kids in the New York City school system ... with some sort of special need. It’s a challenge to work with horses in the city, but it’s vitally important. Therapeutic riding works for almost everyone. Horses are good that way.”

When he started as a volunteer five years ago, Wilson said he didn’t really understand therapeutic riding and admitted to being skeptical. One day he began working with a 4-year-old girl whose world was severely circumscribed by autism. The child was restless and unfocused and would try to jump off the horse.

“At that moment I saw how powerful therapeutic riding can be, the change it can have on the riders,” Wilson said. “I thought, ‘This is not just a pony ride.’ It’s actually making a difference in people’s lives.”

“...It’s uniquely effective. They get on, and they can control the horse, and they have power and freedom they didn’t have before.”

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Walk into the barn at Forest Hills and the noise of the city falls away. It’s Monday and there are no therapeutic riding lessons and the horses are taking full advantage of the mid-morning lull. Mister Big sticks his head over the stall door to see if the footsteps and voices might mean more hay, but except for the occasional lazily swiveled ear, the other horses are busy thinking deep equine thoughts.

Wilson does morning rounds, checking the stalls, straightening a blanket here, making a mental note to talk to the stable manager there. “We’re not a fancy place,” he observes, with a nod to the well-loved tack. “We’re a place that teaches people how to ride horses, and you don’t need fancy polished boots to do that.”

Therapeutic riding takes precedence, but GallopNYC also offers recreational lessons to people in the community as part of their horse education mission. The 100-150 recreational lessons underwrite their therapeutic work, Wilson said, “so when our recreational riders take a lesson… it’s not just a riding lesson, they’re helping someone.”

For every therapeutic ride, he said, they try to have one where the horse is taken out onto the bridle paths at nearby Forest Park, a 500-acre natural treasure at Gallop’s doorstep. Lessons for advanced riders can also be taken on the park’s bridle paths – Gallop does not offer trail rides – and the combination of therapy and recreational work is part of the design. “It’s good for the horses,” Wilson explained. “Good for them to have a balanced rider on their back.”

There are 33 horses and ponies in Gallop’s therapeutic herd. Wilson opens the door to one stall and, with a little encouragement, Harry Potter the pony sticks out an inquisitive nose. This is a second career for many of the horses, offered to the program by owners who felt they would be a good match for the work of being a therapy horse. There’s no explaining to a horse that the work they are doing is rewarding and important; either they have it in their nature to be gentle, accepting and infinitely patient, or they do not.

“We want a horse that has a really sweet personality, that isn’t going to push people around,” Wilson said as Harry Potter snuffled around his feet. “A horse that’s nice. Our type is nice.”

Hava Israel found horses two years ago, in what she calls her “lemons to lemonade” moment. She’d been living with multiple sclerosis, a disease of the central nervous system that disrupts the communication between the brain and the body. In the four years since her diagnosis, she had received a catalogue of can’ts from her body and her doctors: can’t kayak, can’t ski, can’t take part in any of the activities she loved.

She had only ridden one or two times when doctors recommended therapeutic riding as a way to bring sports back into her life. At GallopNYC, instructors gave L’Hava exercises to stretch her muscles and improve her balance and introduced her to a saintly Norwegian Fjord horse named Daisy. Almost immediately, she said, her MS quieted and she began to see improvements in how she walked.

A mechanical lift raises L’Hava from the mounting block on to Daisy’s back and in the arena, they are more than horse and rider, they are a team. Being on a horse, she found, eased her in a way that no other physical therapy had. Over the months, as L’Hava gained strength in her arms and legs, she shed the sidewalkers to ride independently. Instructors gave her goals and support. Daisy gave her confidence and freedom.

“I call her Dr. Daisy,” L’Hava said. “I think she does more for me than my doctors.”

And she found something else in her bond with the sweet caramel mare: a measure of proof for all who have found promise in a horse.

It happened one day at the end of the semester’s lessons. A timed obstacle course was set up for the riders, and the fastest pair through had finished in 48 seconds. “I wasn’t being competitive about it,” L’Hava recalled, but her horse had a different idea. “Daisy decided she wanted to win the race.”

She finished in 35 seconds. Call it magic.

“Daisy’s like us,” L’Hava said, taking in, with a sweep of her hands, all who ride here; a community built on the belief that they will rise above. “She’s like us. She’s not going to be counted out.”

LEARN MORE

GallopNYC offers therapeutic riding programs for children and adults. Whatever the disability, their board chair notes, “the horse seems to have an answer.”

Explore their opportunities, including an Adopt-A-Horse program, at gallopnyc.org.