

Hope and healing with horses at therapeutic riding centers



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For The Baltimore Sun

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"The horses gave me hope." --Cathy Schmidt, executive director of Abingdon's Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding

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On a sunny summer day, 14-year-old Julianna Lupacchino is riding a horse on a Fallston farm. At first glance, the scene seems like nothing special — Harford County is horse country, after all — but at Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding, the occasion is very special indeed; Julianna more frequently uses a wheelchair.

Julianna is one of 23 therapeutic riding clients at Chesapeake, where trained staff, volunteers and medical professionals use horses to facilitate physical and mental therapy. Cathy Schmidt, executive director of Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding, explains that the horses provide a fun emotional outlet for riders and that the gait of the horse mimics the human gait, providing consistent movement that helps riders strengthen muscles.

“Therapeutic riding helps her core, which helps improve her walking,” adds Kelly Lupacchino, Julianna’s mother. Julianna, who is living with cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that affects body movement and muscle coordination, is able to walk with a walker but hopes to graduate to crutches soon, Kelly says. Julianna’s physical therapist is also supportive of the program because the lessons help widen the teenager’s range of motion.

One big advantage of therapeutic riding is that students don’t see it as a chore, as they often do with ordinary physical or occupational therapy.

“Julianna calls this her sport,” her mother explains. “She doesn’t really see it as therapy.”

Powered by volunteers

At today’s lesson, Julianna will ride Crystal, a 32-year-old former dressage champion. Crystal’s age makes her a good therapy horse. She’s willing to move slowly and to stand perfectly still long enough for Julianna to mount her.

“Crystal is a sweetheart,” says Rich Bledsoe, one of more than 80 volunteers who help keep Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding running smoothly throughout the year. Two years ago, Bledsoe came to Chesapeake to drop off his horse-loving daughter, Lizzy, who also volunteers there. Eventually he started helping out as well.

Dedicated volunteers are critical to any therapeutic riding program. At Normandy Farm, Harford County’s only other therapeutic riding program, there’s a waiting list for new riders because so many volunteers are needed to work with just one student.

“We’re always looking for more volunteers,” says owner Sarah Watson, who runs the program on a working farm in Street.

Back at Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding, three volunteers help Julianna Lupacchino out of her wheelchair, while a fourth steadies the horse until she is fully mounted. Once on horseback, Julianna uses a handhold on her saddle to straighten up. Sitting tall on the horse helps her strengthen the muscles she’ll need to spend more time walking and less time in her wheelchair. A trained staff member then guides the horse around the indoor arena at a gentle pace, while the volunteers remain with the horse to help keep the rider seated if necessary.

Help comes full circle

The temperament of the horse is the other critical component in therapeutic riding. Every year, a team of Normandy Farm students attends the Maryland [Special Olympics](#). This year, eight riders went to the games and each of them received at least one medal. A trusting relationship with the horse is essential for that kind of success.

Watson points to Danny Grau, 27, who has an autism spectrum disorder and has been riding at Normandy Farm since he was 10 years old.

“Danny’s favorite horse by far is Norton,” says Watson. In 2007, after many years of riding together, Grau took Norton to the Special Olympic World Games in Shanghai.

“Norton is extremely gentle and very cooperative,” Watson explains.

Schmidt agrees that only a certain type of horse has the special talent needed to be a therapy horse.

“A horse can be the most beautiful, best horse in the world,” she says. “But it must be comfortable being led around, or we can’t use him. And not all horses are comfortable with that.”

At Chesapeake, the horses come in a range of sizes to accommodate a variety of riders. Often, the horses are being helped just as much as the riders. Captain is a 28-year-old registered American quarter horse who can’t jump fences anymore due to **arthritis**. Now he thrives at Chesapeake, where he’s been a therapy horse since December 2008.

Lessons at both facilities tend to slow down in winter, due to weather and the fragile health of many riders. And as a working farm, Normandy Farm doesn’t offer lessons in summer. Its two 10-week sessions of riding lessons begin in September and in April.

Chesapeake, on the other hand, operates year-round, so Schmidt has developed a diverse range of activities to keep her horses busy. There’s “The Equine Experience,” which takes Sally the pony to visit nursing home residents. A licensed physical therapist conducts hippotherapy — physical therapy on horseback — on a weekly basis, and a doctor of psychology uses equine-assisted psychotherapy to stimulate discussion with patients and work on a range of emotional issues.

From passion to vocation

An enthusiastic horsewoman, Schmidt started Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding in 2003. Although she’d listened to the advice about taking a “sensible job” and not trying to make her passion for horses into a career, she maintained her connection to the animals. When her sensible job in the home construction industry disappeared in the recent economic downturn, Schmidt was at loose ends.

“The horses gave me hope,” she says.

Wanting to share the hope with others, she decided to expand her part-time therapeutic riding practice into a full-time endeavor. Earlier this year, Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding broke ground on a 40-acre site on the Oakington peninsula near Havre de Grace. A capital campaign is under way to help fund the new facility.

Meanwhile, the program is temporarily housed on a private horse farm in Fallston. There, Julianna completes her ride around the indoor arena as Cathy watches.

“Not everyone can be cured,” she tells me. “But everyone can experience healing.”

Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding

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