

NEWS > REGIONAL NEWS >

Helping Hands and Hooves

Love inspired creation of therapeutic riding program

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By **Bobbi Sistrunk, CNC Newspapers**



Julie Craig teaches students in her therapeutic riding program to ride without reins whenever possible to help them acquire better balance.

Staff photo/Bobbi Sistrunk



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MATTAPOISETT - Tucked away down a side road off Route 6 in Mattapoisett is a lovely old refurbished riding stable known as Sea Horse Farm. Abandoned for several years, owner and trainer Julie Craig, along with her husband and two sons, renovated the aged farmhouse while living in the old post and beam barn along with their horses.

Today this is no ordinary stable; it is a magical place for children and adults. Julie is an accomplished dressage rider, instructor and trainer and has several students in training for competition. A Jack Russell terrier endlessly vies for a visitor's attention. A tennis ball firmly planted in mouth, he digs at a guest's toes until the ball is thrown. This is not a place for those who aren't amused by animals of all varieties. The 4-acre farm is well utilized, with a large riding arena and a

short trail for riders and horses to relax on after a training session. The beach at Hiller Cove is also readily accessible for riding. Although the focus at the farm is dressage, Julie is also involved in another teaching endeavor; therapeutic riding.

When Deb Dyson and her family moved south from Scituate in search of more open space, her parents and brother, Brendan Goss, soon followed. Both families now live in Mattapoisett, close to Sea Horse Farm.

Deb started taking her daughter, Jackie, to the farm for riding lessons. The 9-year-old loves lessons on the farm's consummate beginner horse, Copper, a 24-year-old quarter horse with an innate ability to understand the needs of his rider and behave accordingly.

One day Deb brought Brendan along to watch one of his niece's lessons. Brendan, 39, is autistic. "There are very few social outlets for autistic students after high school," Deb said. "I was trying to find outlets for him where he could interact with the general public on an equal level." She found that at Sea Horse Farm.

During one of Jackie's lessons, Julie suggested Brendan try riding Copper. Considered highly functioning, Brendan is more than capable of interacting with the horse, who now serves dual duty as a therapeutic riding mount, as well as a school horse for other students at the farm. "Julie said 'Let's try Brendan riding' one day," Deb said. "My parents and I didn't think he'd get on." They were wrong.

Brendan was immediately comfortable in the saddle. Much to the surprise of his sister, he was hooked. "He loves it, his self confidence increased, his flexibility," Deb said. It provided him the common ground Deb had been seeking for her brother. "He's made a lot of friends at the farm," Deb said.

Jackie looks forward to her lessons and also loves the fact that her Uncle Brendan now rides Copper, too. "The best thing is Julie and I walk the horses on the beach," Brendan is quick to add.

Julie's 7-year-old son, Ian, is also autistic. Deb thinks having Brendan at the farm, seeing the progress he has made, helps Julie to see the possibility of a bright future for her son. "Julie has an amazing effect on people with disabilities, she just gets it," Deb said.

Brendan is lucky; he's able to pay for lessons himself. Many special-needs people are not. Seeing Brendan's response to the equine experience gave Deb and Julie the inspiration to help others find the joy and benefit of horseback riding.

Helping Hands and Hooves (HHH) was born out of love - for Deb's brother and Julie's son and the desire to help others with disabilities. "We wanted to reach out to people who have the same disabilities, people who are struggling, people who could benefit, like Brendan, but can't afford it."

Brendan has been riding for two years now. He is not part of the Helping Hands and Hooves program, which provides lessons to students according to a sliding scale charge, but encourages others to join. "I would really like to get some other kids to try horseback riding, with or without disabilities," Brendan said. "I'm not nervous now; I'm comfortable."

Julie teaches balance and breathing techniques to students while they're in the saddle. "She's a nice instructor and she teaches other kids and some adults horseback riding," Brendan said.

HHH hopes to use Brendan as a consultant to the program's board of directors to assist them in designing future programs. "He is very articulate and would be beneficial to the structure of the program, offering insight from a disabled person's point of view," his sister said.

A program based in New Bedford, Supporting Adults for Inclusive Living (SAIL), recommends candidates for the HHH riding program. SAIL's mission statement says it is dedicated to the belief that all individuals have abilities and can become valued members of their community. Structure is a crucial component of support for people with autism. That structure is often lost after students leave high school and HHH and SAIL can help to provide it again.

Case manager Ricardo DaCruz and his assistant manager have identified possible candidates who went on to successfully participate in the riding program. The one-hour sessions are tailored to the individual student. Riding, grooming or just walking the grounds all serve to integrate students into the program. "It worked out wonderfully," DaCruz said. "It really made the students feel at peace; the overall well-being of the students is wonderful. It particularly helps people with autism."

One of his clients, a 33-year-old man, "came alive," he said. "Something about the spatial interaction between a person with autism and a horse brings out inner peace; the movement of the horse, it just does something," he said.

"SAIL is all about helping individuals gain independence. The merger between the horse program and SAIL gives people with disabilities the same opportunity as other individuals."

The program ends when the cold weather approaches, but DaCruz said he looks forward to sending clients to the farm when the program starts back up in the spring.

Oftentimes students don't even ride; they just spend time interacting with the people and animals on the farm.

Some of Brendan's favorite "farm hands" are the numerous Guinea hens roaming the property. The hens tend to lay their eggs in unusual places. Brendan recalls once having to move 52 eggs from a neighbor's property. The hens weren't happy about it and, ultimately, the eggs were placed in an incubator to hatch. Julie named one Brendan after her star student. When they realized the chick was a female, Brendan renamed her Brenda. His namesake has produced many eggs since.

"Now I'm a grandfather to Guinea hens!" he exclaimed proudly.

HHH requires the efforts of many people. Along with Julie's training expertise and Deb service as director, Deb's husband, Erik, is the organization's treasurer. Marissa Hughes, a special-needs teacher, serves as secretary and is responsible for establishing the group's bylaws and filling out paperwork.

In September, the group applied for 501c3 nonprofit status. Deb recently received word the group was approved. That nonprofit status allows donations to be deducted from your taxes, making the process more appealing to the group's benefactors. "People have wanted to donate large items - saddles, horses - now they can get the tax benefits," she said.

A \$1,400 mini grant, recently acquired through the United Way, paid for saddles and bridles and helmets for participants.

The farm now accommodates more than 20 riders with disabilities as well as Julie's dressage students. The bond between horse and rider is evident. With the intent to focus on one-on-one, individualized training in a quiet small-farm atmosphere, Sea Horse Farm is the perfect location for the HHH program.

Helping Hands and Hooves in Mattapoisett can be reached by phone at 508-758-4717 or go online to www.helpinghandsandhooves.org.