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Above: Just some of the 60 estimated participants who braved the chilly weather to take the plunge into the water off the Mattapoisett Town Beach for a Christmas day swim to benefit the local Helping Hands and Hooves organization on the morning of December 25. One of the horses from the local Seahorse Farms where the non-profit organization is based even got into the act. (Photo courtesy of Debbi Dyson).

“Helping Horses” **Swim Benefits Hands and Hooves** By Kenneth J. Souza In the tradition of holiday dips into area chilly waters of local communities to benefit a charity of choice, some 60 people took the brisk plunge into the water at the Mattapoisett Town Beach on Christmas morning, December

25, to benefit the town-based Helping Hands and Hooves organization. The non-profit Helping Hands and Hooves, which is based out of Seahorse Farms in Mattapoisett, is dedicated to providing weekly therapeutic riding lessons for adults with disabilities.

According to organizer Debbi Dyson, this is the first year that proceeds from the Christmas

swim were earmarked for the newly-established Helping Hands and Hooves. “In the past, we’ve raised money for Community Cancer Care and Habitat for Humanity,” Ms. Dyson said of the now five-year-old event. “But from now on we’ll be (raising funds) for Helping Hands and Hooves.” Another estimated 70 onlookers remained safe and dry on shore watching the 60 swimmers brave the warmer than usual but still chilly Mattapoisett waters at 11:00 am on Christmas morning. The event managed to raise some \$1,500 which Ms. Dyson noted would help fund lessons for the upcoming spring session. “All the money raised will be used for lessons,” Ms. Dyson said. “Right now we’re taking a break with lessons because it’s just too cold. But we’ll be starting up (again) in the spring.” Formed just this past year by Ms. Dyson and trainer Julie Craig, the Mattapoisett-based Helping Hands and Hooves is the latest in a growing trend of programs which provide therapy via horseback riding and related activities. “We currently have eight students, mostly from the New Bedford area,” Ms. Dyson said. “Some have cerebral palsy, some have autism. We were inspired by my brother, who is 38 and is autistic. Out of the blue one day he decided to try horseback riding and the change in him was unbelievable. Being at the farm really changed him physically and emotionally.” Although a fairly new form of therapy, Ms. Dyson said recent studies examining programs like Helping Hands and Hooves have been very encouraging. “There’s all kinds of studies that have shown these programs work not only for physical therapy but for (the students’) emotional and social therapy as well,” she said. “It’s amazing to see the progress in some of our students.

And not only from horseback riding, but also from tending to the horses, too. Just watching some of them grooming the horses is amazing.” Ms. Dyson noted that Julie Craig oversees the actual riding lessons at Seahorse Farms and their organization has become affiliated with Supporting Adults for Independent Living (SAIL) out of New Bedford. Although they recently received a mini grant through the local United Way, the bulk of their support comes through donations and fundraisers like the Christmas swim. For volunteer information or to make a donation, please consult the organization’s website at www.helpinghandsandhooves.org.

