

HORSING AROUND IN HARFORD COUNTY

Therapeutic Riding

One of the less visible elements of the horse industry in Harford County is therapeutic riding, providing recreational opportunities for individuals who are physically, emotionally and developmentally challenged, helping them experience a feeling of independence while learning skills, gaining confidence and improving concentration.

Sarah Watson, founder of Normandy Farms Therapeutic Riding, explained that “for many of the people who come to us, riding is their only physical recreation. Opportunities to participate in sports are limited for persons with disabilities and we find that learning to ride improves their posture, coordination, strength and flexibility.” Sarah, who has owned and trained horses for most of her life, is an instructor at The Highlands School. Through researching learning strategies for students who experience academic challenges, Sarah was impressed with the success of therapeutic riding programs in building self esteem and self discipline. She founded Normandy Farms in 1992, with a Board that includes volunteers trained at Wilson College, one of only three colleges nationwide that offer a four-year degree in therapeutic riding. “All our staff are volunteers – people who have years of experience with horses, as well as people with no horse experience at all but a desire to help.”

During a typical lesson, volunteers work with a rider in an enclosed ring or stable area, teaching riding skills, care of the horse and guiding them to participate in games on horseback, an obstacle course or gymnastic type movements on the back of the horse. Most of the lessons are in the indoor arena, with an occasional stroll through the countryside.”

Normandy Farms has participated in the Maryland State Special Olympics for the last



photo courtesy of www.normandyfarm.org

10 years and, recently, at the World Special Olympics. 12-week sessions are held in spring and fall. Visit their website at www.normandyfarm.org to find how therapeutic riding adds recreation to the lives of persons with disabilities and how you can volunteer.

Like Normandy Farms, Chesapeake Therapeutic Riding is a non-profit organization, dedicated to providing healing services. Clients include persons with autism, cerebral palsy, developmental delays, ADHD and hearing or vision impairment.

Founder Kathy Schmidt

explained that there are three aspects of the programs offered: therapeutic riding, hippotherapy and equine assisted psychotherapy.

Hippotherapy is conducted by a physical therapist certified by the American Hippotherapy Association. It utilizes the movements of the horse to facilitate improvements in balance, coordination, posture, fine motor control and increased cognitive skills. This differs from therapeutic riding in that the therapist directs the movements of the horse as part of an integrated treatment program. Hippotherapy is particularly successful as treatment for cerebral palsy and autism.

Equine assisted psychotherapy is conducted by a team that includes a mental health professional and an equine specialist. Because horses are particularly sensitive to our emotions, working with a horse can mirror our relationships with our family and ourself. EAP is an alternative therapy that has proven useful in resolving anxiety, eating disorders, PTSD, and depression and can help support family or couples counseling.

To find out more about these healing programs, visit www.chesapeaketherapeuticriding.org ●