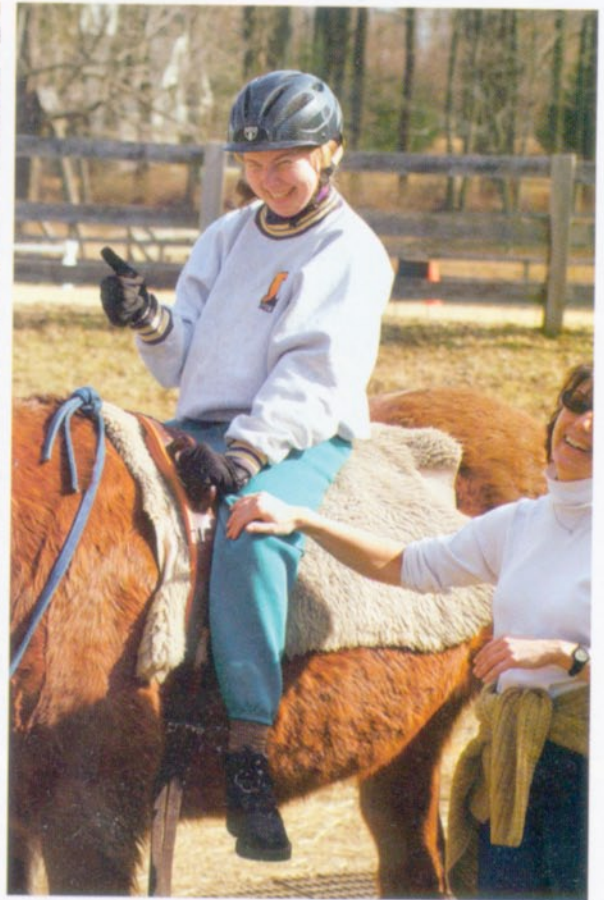
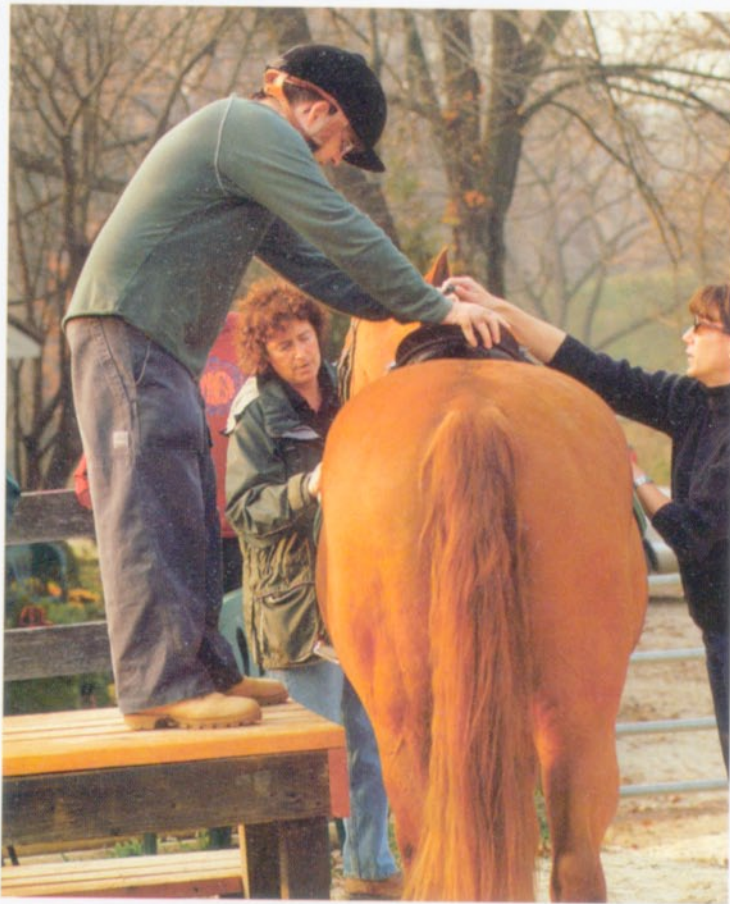


Riding To New Heights

*At Hope Springs
Equestrian
Therapy,
participants learn
not only to ride,
they gain a new
self image*

BY STEFANIE RYAN





Top, clockwise from left to right: Hope Springs founder Elena Schaffer steadies a horse for rider and Camphill Soltane resident Sean Keenan. Instructor Bob Rosoff reads the horse. Wide smiles and enthusiastic gestures like rider Jean Knowlton's are ubiquitous at Hope Springs. Jean's mother, Jeannie, is one of the program's riding instructors. Stacey Esposito (second from left) and her brother Mark (second from right) groom their horse with volunteers and Elena following their weekly lesson. Instructor Ange Bean watches Paul Bishar groom his horse following a lesson. At Hope Springs, caring for horses is just as physically and emotionally therapeutic for the program's participants as riding.

T

here is a place in Chester County where smiles are contagious. It is a place where the meek become courageous, the weak gain strength, and those prone to isolation enjoy closeness with others, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

The place is Hope Springs. And whether it is located on an idyllic farm in Malvern at the time of this printing, or in its sprawling planned home in Kimberton, the transformation it reaps in those who spend time there has, and will, follow the nonprofit organization wherever it lays its roots.

Hope Springs Equestrian Therapy provides therapeutic horseback riding (also known as equine-facilitated therapy), for individuals with disabilities like Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism, Spina Bifida, Asperger Syndrome and a range of other developmental delays. Through interaction with their horses, their instructors and each other, Hope Springs riders learn that they are not as limited as they, their peers or their families might have once believed.

The understanding that empowerment comes from trying new things is the reason Elena Schaffer founded Hope Springs in 1997. It is also very much a part of her own life story. Elena, a former student of the highly esteemed Thorncroft Equestrian Center in Malvern, dispels assumptions that her life's work stems from a youth spent among horses and/or the disabled.

Growing up in Bryn Mawr, Elena did have access to horses, and admits she

took every opportunity she could to ride. But the 360-degree turn her career path took in her 30s—following the attainment of a bachelor's degree in music and years spent as a paralegal—she attributes to the sense of service instilled in her by her parents and the Quaker education she received at Friends Central School in Bala Cynwyd.

"Growing up, I was steered away from prejudice—people who were different were just as accepted." With service in her heart, and having reached a point in her career where she realized the corporate world—although it could be counted on for a steady paycheck—was leaving her emotionally unfulfilled. A single mother of her then 4-year-old son, Jack, Elena decided volunteerism might fill that creative void.

And so she joined a riding club. When the club posted notice that there was an equestrian therapy program seeking volunteers, she eagerly signed up. And when Elena saw an advertisement for a nine-month course on teaching the medium at Thorncroft, she decided to give that a try as well. She hasn't looked back since.

"The minute I walked into the class I knew it was what I wanted to do," she remembers. Soon after she completed her training, she decided to set up her own operation. With little more than one woman's fierce determination, a leased plot of land on a Spring City farm and a borrowed pony, the Hope Springs dream soon sprang to life.



Left, Hailey Gustanis, who has been associated with Hope Springs since its founding in 1977, cleans her saddle after a lesson. Opposite, clockwise from top, families, riders instructors and volunteers convened at Bryn Coed Farm for the 2003 Ride for Hope, a Hunter Pace event that is also a fundraiser for Hope Springs. Ange assists Erica Allegretto onto her horse, while resident cats look on from a safe distance. Ange guides Erica around the track. Hope Springs' riders are encouraged to pursue their potential, and are not given lessons in cantering until the rider has trotted for a year. Camphill Soltane resident Emily Zimmerman looks like a pro atop her steed. Emily is one of many Soltane residents, a non-profit community for the disabled, who journey from Glenmoore once a week for equestrian therapy.





“I

started with a few kids and pretty soon I was getting referrals left and right,” Elena says. “Within a year, I had totally outgrown the space.”

Today, Hope Springs is in the midst of a \$1 million capital campaign. The money will go toward the construction of a completely handicapped-accessible 14-stall barn and indoor riding arena on 20 acres of land leased from Camp Hill Village in Kimberton.

The benefits of this vastly improved setup are three-fold: It will allow students to enjoy the program regardless of weather, expand the number of riders Hope Springs can serve and reduce operating costs, thereby rendering the program self-sufficient in just a few short years.

Hope Springs presently serves riders as young as age two and on up through their 70s, and its timetable is much like an after-school program. Hour-long sessions are held weekdays at 3:30 and again at 5 p.m.

The day I visited Hope Springs—at about 3:15 p.m.—the sky looked as if it was about to burst open and the Malvern farm was deserted. That is unless you count Wendy and Peter, the resident cats who—from the looks of their girth—lurk around the stables scooping up the left-over feed of the Hope Springs horses.

At the stroke of 3:30 p.m., with Wendy and Peter fighting over space on my lap, a caravan of vehicles suddenly appeared

and made their way up to the barn. First came Jeannie Knowlton, one of Hope Spring’s seasoned instructors, and the mother of Jean, one of the riding program’s participants.

Soon after, the first wave of riders arrived—residents of Camphill Soltane in Glenmoore, a nonprofit residential community that serves people with special needs. Winston Salmi, a native Brazilian who works and lives at Camphill Soltane with his family, transports the riders each week, then sticks around to lend a hand as needed.

Winston’s experience with the disabled and horses, is invaluable to the instructors. Before moving to America a few years ago, Winston often partook of riding opportunities at his family’s farm in Brazil. His 24-year-old son, Diego, is autistic, and also a rider at Hope Springs.

When Camphill Soltane’s van doors fly open, the group works together to get Paula, who suffers from cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, securely situated on the farm’s uneven terrain. I am immediately accosted by Maria Campbell, who hugs me enthusiastically and then is off and running again to greet others. Although it seems as if Maria’s energy will never dissipate, once situated atop her steed, the therapeutic nature of horseback riding becomes apparent.

Winston lovingly explains, “Maria ...

continued on page 76



Opposite, clockwise from top left, Paul Bishar grooms his horse before his riding lesson. Elena says Hope Springs’ horses, including Taylor shown here, seem to know instinctively that their mounts require special care, and, in return, she ensures that the horses receive special care. Volunteer Victoria Franzen (left) and Elena oversee Jean Knowlton as she circles the track. At 53, Larry Evans is one of the programs middle-aged riders. Riders range in age from 3 to 73. Jeannie Knowlton assists Larry during his lesson. Ann Donatelli grooms her horse. Grooming not only improves fine motor development and hand-eye coordination, but it also allows riders to “own” their experience at Hope Springs. Left, David and Connie Carter, board members for Hope Springs, proudly watch their riders participate at the 2003 Ride for Hope.

she's a disaster. She runs and screams. But on the horse ... for a half-hour, she is still and quiet." And grinning from ear to ear.

Winston is well aware of the calming effect of riding. He believes intently on its therapeutic possibilities, and speaks of building a program in Brazil that mirrors Elena's upon return to his homeland.

Elena is well-versed in the physical benefits that riding brings to the disabled: strength, balance, dexterity, flexibility, coordination and posture.

She cites examples of students who have never even walked that learn to sit up straight on a horse, and the many Hope Springs riders, who have, despite their disabilities, gone on to win ribbons at the annual Special Olympics in State College, PA.

But you sense that at Hope Springs, it is not as much about what therapeutic riding brings to the body, but rather what it brings to the soul.

Elena notes that the ancient Greeks practiced a precursor of equine-facilitated therapy, and that the formal name, hippotherapy, is derived from their word for horse. The treatment also flourished in Europe in its more classical form in the early part of the 20th century.

Hope Springs program is less body-based, however. "Here, it's more of a recreational form. All these kids really want to learn how to ride. That's why they are here. They want to learn a new skill, show off something their peers don't do. And our kids do it really well. Their energy is amazing."

The horses at Hope Springs are specially trained to meet the demands of their disabled riders, and Elena says they seem to instinctively know their mounts require extra care, kindness and patience. In reward for their efforts, the horses are heaped with affection and special treatment.

And although each of Hope Springs' instructors has gone through rigorous training in equine-facilitated therapy, Elena says that

even more important is their love and knowledge of riding.

"We pick horse people because the horse is our tool. This is the medium, and if we don't know how to work with it, we can fail," she says.

While riding is certainly the highlight of each lesson for the program's participants, Elena believes the before and after care is just as integral to its therapeutic possibilities.

Grooming sessions improve hand-eye coordination and fine motor development, but even more vital is the feeling of self-sufficiency and sense of ownership the riders develop through caring for their horses. And as Elena aptly notes, individuals who may not even be able to walk unassisted, but are able to direct a 1,200-pound animal, begin to realize that, perhaps, the sky is the limit.

With that realization comes a newfound sense of courage, and of course, hope that they can be successful in all aspects of their lives if

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they so desire. "We want them to learn how to do for themselves," Elena says. "And we take them as far as they want to go."

That is not to say that the instructors aren't cautious when it comes to their pupils' safety. In fact, Elena recognizes that the program is on the conservative side. Hope Springs' riders must prove their readiness for new challenges through consistent, successful efforts before they are permitted to spread their wings further. For examples, she says, "We won't let them canter until we've seen them trot for a year."

The families of Hope Springs' riders couldn't be more appreciative of the program; for it is a program that focuses not on disabilities, but on abilities instead.

Beth Egan, the mother of 15-year-old Michael Serocki, says she learned of the warm environment of Hope Springs from other families. "I

heard the instructors were really sensitive to the kids' personalities and to meeting their special needs," Beth says.

Beth is glad the sensitivity of Michael's instructor, Ange Bean, is tempered with an insistence upon challenging her son. "Angie is really demanding. She really gets him to focus. I wish there were more people in his life that could motivate him in that way."

Michael, in addition to autism, has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and a "host of other learning abilities," his mother says. He began at Hope Springs two years ago after trying out other programs that weren't "quite the right fit."

Elena believes that those with autism especially benefit by the atmosphere at Hope Springs. "Individuals with autism are often lacking socialization skills. But through the extent they interact with us, with the volunteers, the horses, and even each other, they learn to forget that their general propensity is to ignore other people," Elena reveals.

During my visit, Beth lovingly watched her son brush J-Lo, his favorite horse (so named for her large posterior and chestnut forelock). She was eager to inform him that he had made it to the Special Olympics in State College, an annual event that Hope Springs riders' are often skilled enough to participate in.

Although just her first year at Hope Springs, Kate Nichlin, a 20-year-old young woman with Down Syndrome, is already accomplished enough to serve as an alternate at the Special Olympics. If you were to watch Kate riding from a distance, you would not for a moment believe she has a disability. Instead, you marvel at the fluidity with which she posts in time with the horse trotting beneath her.

And when you learn she has only ridden once before, as a five-year-old child, you are even more amazed by her graceful equestrian presence. When Kate speaks of her family coming to see her ride competitively at the event, it is with great pride.

But then, pride runs rampant at Hope Springs. Riders are well aware that they are doing what no one,

even they, expected they could someday do. That is why capturing the moment in photographs is quite common. Paula Levai, once situated on her horse with the aid of Winston and Jeannie (she is transferred from her wheelchair situated on a wooden ramp parallel with the horse's saddle), she is all smiles.

Winston obliges her by taking the first of many photos during the afternoon lesson. Relatively new to riding, Paula has already won four ribbons in competitions. It is quite a coup, considering she cannot even walk.

Hope Springs aims to improve the lives of all who choose to spend time there. And it certainly seems to. Its therapeutic possibilities extend beyond those with physical disabilities to those suffering from emotional turmoil.

Partly due to the safe vibes it permeates, and partly because of concentrated efforts by Elena and her staff, all who enter Hope Springs environs are empowered in one way or another.

Elena explains that while many of the program's volunteers are "horse-crazy teens with big hearts," or those who lent their time for a service project and couldn't tear themselves away afterward, she is actively working with the county to start up a program that would attract young women battling issues of peer pressure and low self-esteem as volunteers. Serving as mentors to others vastly, and irrevocably, improves one's confidence, and inspires the courage to pursue their full potential, Elena says.

There are even more plans to expand Hope Springs offerings. A summer camp is in its nascent stages, and Beth Egan notes that every time she sees Elena, she is feverishly focusing on ways to better serve her riders.

From the looks of the grins spreading among the stables on an overcast afternoon, Hope Springs riders couldn't get much happier.

For information about Hope Springs Equestrian Therapy, call 610-827-0931 or visit (www.hope-springs.org). ♦

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A Couple's Crowning Glory

continued from page 67

going to be torn down. Finishing this space is a wall with 10 sets of windows and doors opening to the rear grounds. Two grand fixtures, suspended from the wood beamed ceiling, illuminate the open and expansive space. These fixtures, as well as all those in the house, were purchased from Lighting By Design in Exton.

Just off the great room is an interesting space. During the restoration, they decided to attach the original stone smokehouse to the main building. Chuck and June converted the smokehouse into a tiny, intimate chapel. All of the original structure is

*"We saw it in a shop
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thought it would be
fun to have in the
house, an all-season
spa room features a
swim spa, the
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for aquatic relaxation
and therapy,
where you swim
against the current."*

still present. Entrance into this stone structure is through a narrow wood-framed doorway from the great room. The vaulted-ceiling chapel is stoically appointed with an antique wood table that functions as an altar and a few chairs.

For the formal right wing, Chuck and June envisioned a more sophisticated design. "We used to stand in the driveway and envision the floor plan," June recounts. The entrance hall, all in tumbled, multi-colored limestone, is majestically enhanced by a sweeping staircase, done in

French limestone and embellished with handcrafted wrought iron railings. The railings were custom made by Greg Leavitt. June wanted the ironwork to depict Chester County wildflowers. Climbing the staircase and punctuating the second-floor balcony overlooking the entrance hall is this intricately designed railing, made of more than 2,000 pieces all individually crafted. Decorating the center of the entrance hall is an antique black sleigh, a unique piece for this space.

Galleries to the right and left of the hallway lead into the formal living spaces. In the formal living room, punctuated with rosewood herringbone flooring, sits an antique carousel horse. As Chuck and Jane explain, it is a rocking horse for adults. "We saw it in a shop in New Orleans and thought it would be fun to have in the house," explains Chuck. An all-season spa room features a swim spa, the optimum accoutrement for aquatic relaxation and therapy, where you swim against the current. The area is accented with French terra cotta tile floor.

On the second floor of the formal addition are three bedrooms, including the master suite and bath. In the bedroom, two 100-year-old German stained-glass panels grace French doors that lead to a private balcony—and the only decorations needed. The panels are from Saint Bonaventure's Church in Philadelphia. Book-matched marble accents the tub, walls and floors of the master bathroom.

In the original section of the farmhouse, existing spaces were re-appointed. In the kitchen, which was built more than 50 years ago, they added all new cabinetry. "We wanted this room to be timeless," says Chuck. This room houses the original colonial fireplace, which they rejuvenated with a Tuscan-looking surround. The room has been updated with a marble countertop, center island and cherry cabinets from Coventry Kitchens. Adjacent to the kitchen is the new breakfast room, once an outdoor patio. The décor is complemented by the outside stonewall, which was uncovered and re-pointed. Tall picture windows