



HOSPITAL PROFILES
NURSE PROMOTES REHAB THROUGH RIDING

As a child in rural New Jersey, Judy Schaffer, RN, a staff nurse in New York Weill Cornell's Burn Center, loved riding horses. She returned to this passion when she began taking lessons at the Claremont Riding Academy on Manhattan's Upper West Side, where she learned of a program that allows people with disabilities to enjoy the pleasures and therapeutic benefits of horseback riding.

For two years, Ms. Schaffer has volunteered her spare time to a program called Equestriasm, run by the non-profit New York Therapeutic Riding Center. The program's participants include adults and children with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, mental retardation, stroke, blindness, autism, and traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries.

Ms. Schaffer assists riders when they mount and dismount, leads the horses, helps riders maintain balance and proper alignment while atop the horse, and assists riders with exercises under the direction of the physical or occupational therapist and therapeutic riding instructor.

Patients are referred to the therapeutic riding program by physicians, hospitals and rehabilitation agencies in the five boroughs of New York. Leon Root, MD, Attending Surgeon at New York Weill Cornell and Chief of Pediatric Orthopaedics for the Hospital for Special Surgery, serves as Medical Advisor to the New York Therapeutic Riding Center.

"Riding horses benefits the disabled rider by improving motor skills," Ms. Schaffer says. "Balance and coordination are improved, and sensory and spatial awareness are increased. Muscles are strengthened, and this form of exercise prevents and corrects muscle contractures. The motion of a horse mimics the movement experienced during human ambulation and can significantly improve mobility for disabled riders."



Photo by New York Therapeutic Riding Center

Judy Schaffer (left) holds the bridle of a horse named Honeybun while a patient prepares to ride her.

She adds, "Riders are taught to walk, trot, and steer their horses, with the emphasis being on their abilities rather than their disabilities."

"Therapeutic horseback riding also allows people with disabilities the chance to do something they may never have done before: achieve movement on their own – free of the confinement of a wheelchair and without assistive devices like crutches," says Ms. Schaffer. "The activity promotes mental relaxation and can improve the disabled rider's self-image and confidence. It also gives a person the opportunity to be a part of a group – decreasing social isolation."

Ms. Schaffer says, "Seeing a person with a disability come to classes on crutches and then, during the therapeutic riding lesson, stand up in their stirrups and reach for the ceiling grinning from ear to ear gives me great satisfaction and the knowledge that therapeutic riding works."

To learn more about the New York Therapeutic Riding Center or to volunteer, call 212-535-3917.