

DAILY NEWS

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CRITTERS

Therapy good horse sense

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SIX-AND-A-HALF-year-old Lauren cannot walk without the braces that lay hidden beneath her brown leather cowboy boots.

But once a week, the shy brunette sits high on the saddle of her favorite horse named Blossom — and soars.

"I love horses," Lauren said, as she dismounted from the strong, chestnut-colored horse last week after her 4 p.m. therapeutic riding class, at the Claremont Riding Academy on W. 89th St.

Lauren, who has cerebral palsy, is a three-year veteran of a unique summer program run by the New York Therapeutic Riding Center. The nonprofit group conducts year-round therapeutic horseback riding classes for people with disabilities who live in the five boroughs.

"This is a gift for a child like her," said her father, Sol Reischer, 52.

Lauren is one of a dozen students who attends the Tuesday classes, which are staffed by a therapeutic riding instructor, physical therapist and four gentle horses with good temperaments.

A dedicated cadre of 40 volunteers leads walkers, and side walkers, including officers from the NYPD mounted unit, also play a key role.

"The freedom the horse brings is a wonderful thing," said NYTRC president and founder Richard Brodie, who started the program in 1988. The organization serves people with a wide range of disabilities including autism, blindness, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy and spinal cord injuries.

Students like Sergio Rios, a 17-year-old with Down syndrome, from Flushing, Queens, are helped tremendously by horseback riding, even beyond the physical benefits, Brodie said.

Besides improving balance, posture and coordination, the unique relationship with a strong horse helps boost confidence and self-esteem, increases attention span and improves social skills.

Still, the physical benefits are priceless.

During a recent class, Leah, 6, stood straight up in the stirrups and stretched her arms out to the side, an exercise that helps improve balance and strengthens the muscles affected by polio.



JEREMY BALES

Instructor Sarah-Jane Casey helps cerebral palsy patient Chloe Hart, 4, feed a horse during therapeutic riding class at Claremont Riding Academy on the upper West Side.

"There is no better medicine than the movement of a horse," said Ede Becker, a physical therapist who monitors the student's physical improvements.

Lauren and Leah also attend daily physical therapy sessions at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitative Medicine, part of the NYU Medical Center, which sponsors their therapeutic riding rehabilitation.

Therapeutic riding has been used in Europe since the early 1950s. Of the 600 therapeutic riding programs throughout the U.S. today, most are in suburban and rural areas.

The New York Therapeutic Riding Center, however, stands out for its dedication to urban youth.

Brodie's vision is for disabled city kids and adults to interact with a horse and reap the benefits the emotional bond can provide.

For Savioum, a preschooler from Harlem who has learning disabilities, handling a horse helps tackle issues he struggles with in school — including focus, respect and responsibility.

"They don't get a chance to do that where he comes from," said his grandmother Vanessa Johnson.

Still, renting a riding facility in Manhattan is mighty costly. The program can accommodate only up to 12 students in its present upper West Side location. Brodie's dream, he said, is to have a 6,000-square-foot facility in the city dedicated to the cause. A dedicated therapeutic riding facility could serve up to 100 students a week and offer additional services including vocational training, horse care and stable management.

Then, even more city kids with disabilities could feel how Sergio felt while stroking a gray horse's mane and feeding him carrots. He said, "I feel happy."

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