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Cypress Lake student's art chosen to promote benefit

By Tammy Ayer

tayer@news-press.com

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When two classroom visitors announced a poster contest highlighting horseback riding, Melissa Allen hesitated.

Allen, 17, had art contest experience, and the Cypress Lake High School junior had seen plenty of horses. She just hadn't drawn one.

But as Jan Fifer and Barbara Carlin of Special Equestrians Inc. explained their need last fall — a colorful, positive poster to promote the nonprofit's Feb. 11 Taste of Love IV benefit — Allen decided to compete.

"It's not the realism, it's the feeling," said Allen, who lives in south Fort Myers with her mother, Maureen.

Now Allen, who primarily paints people and their faces in abstract compositions, can add horses to her list of creations.

Her poster won the first such contest for the organization. Allen received \$200, and her artwork will help spread the word about the fundraiser for the local program that provides therapeutic horseback riding to mentally and physically challenged children and adults.

And her original artwork, along with a few more of Allen's pieces, will be auctioned off during the benefit.

The group's biggest annual fundraising event carries a special urgency this year. The barn where eight of the 10 Special Equestrians horses are boarded — Showcase Performance Horse at 860 Palm Creek Drive, off Bayshore Road near the Lee Civic Center — is closing, and the owner wants the group out by



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Poster painted by Melissa Allen, a junior at Cypress Lake High School.

IF YOU GO

- What: Taste of Love 4
- When: 5-9 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 11
- Where: Robb & Stucky Casual Living & Outdoor Showroom, 26501 U.S. 41, Bonita Springs. Call 495-3784.

May 1, said Carlin, co-chairwoman of the fundraiser. The group's other two horses stay at volunteers' homes.

Program coordinators hope someday to purchase 20 acres and construct their own facility, which could cost more than \$1 million. The goal of the upcoming benefit is to sell 250 tickets to raise \$60,000, Carlin said.

The poster contest angle of the fundraiser got under way when Jan Fifer, president of Special Equestrians and co-chairwoman of the fundraiser with Carlin, contacted Ava Roeder, Allen's art teacher. They wanted suggestions from Roeder on which class at the arts magnet high school to involve in the poster competition. They then explained their need to the students in Roeder's advanced placement class.

Those students are completing a curriculum that is equivalent to a college course in visual arts, Roeder noted.

"My students were really affected by what this organization does ... The kids saw firsthand what this auction is for and how it affects kids that are physically handicapped," she said.

Already in an experimental phase because of recent forays into working with fibers and painting on different surfaces, Allen started on a few sketches, going for a more realistic approach.

"I threw those out. I didn't feel right about them," she said.

Moving back into her abstract comfort zone, Allen used acrylic paint and touches of colored pencil — with a lot of turquoise, her signature color — to create two horses, one carrying a solitary figure.

That figure has no face, but Allen knows who he is. He's her father, Tom, who died of cancer when she was 13.

"My dad had passed away when I was in eighth grade. He was an artist, and I think I got a lot of my talent from him," Allen said. "A lot of my work has revolved around him."

Debra Stone, a local artist who judged the poster contest, liked it so much that she chose it as the

- Tickets: \$150 per person
- Hosts: NBC2 News Anchor Jessica Stilwell and NBC2 Chief Meteorologist Robert VanWinkle
- Etc.: In addition to the food and wine tasting, there will be a champagne raffle with a special prize from Mark Loren Designs, live auction, raffle prizes, cigar bar and entertainment by The Paradise Duo
- Sponsors: Robb & Stucky Casual Living & Outdoor Showroom, Austin's Wine Cellar, The News-Press, The Downtown Tobacco Shoppe & World Famous Cigar Bar, Mark Loren Designs, Gulf Coast Printing and Jerry and Barbara Snyderman.
- Information: For tickets or other information, contact Barbara Carlin at (239) 768-2893 or bcarlin801@aol.com or Jan Fifer at (239) 851-7070 or j.fifer@comcast.net.

ABOUT SPECIAL EQUESTRIANS

Special Equestrians Inc. is a horseback riding program that provides therapeutic riding to mentally and physically challenged children and adults. It is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit tax-exempt public charity that is solely supported by contributions from individuals, corporations, civic organizations, private grants and service fees.

It is an all-volunteer self-administrative organization. One hundred percent of all contributions go directly to the support of the program. The therapeutic riding program achieved Premier Accreditation status through NARHA, or North American Riding Handicapped Association, in 2003.

The program supports eight horses and serves more than 50 disabled riders each week. Participating riders range in age from 2 years to 60 plus years. Riders' disabilities include cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, Angelman, head injury, blindness, stroke, autism, deafness, mental retardation, multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and schizencephaly.

Class days are: 3 to 6 p.m Tuesdays and Thursdays; 9 a.m. to noon Wednesdays and Saturdays.

To help fund the nonprofit program, Special Equestrians charges \$72 per person for a six-week session, which comes to about \$12 a lesson.

But 25 of their riders — mostly children — are on scholarship. The program uses about 60 volunteers and three part-time employees a week.

Relying on private and group donations and United Way grants, Special Equestrians runs on a \$162,000 annual operating budget, Carlin said.

Of that, boarding and caring for the horses costs

winner.

“When I saw her work, I could instantly tell she creates and paints from her soul. ... She’s definitely got a gift,” Stone said.

Someday Allen, a Fort Myers native, hopes to go away to college, preferably the Chicago Art Institute. She wants to work in the art field, but she’s not sure how yet.

Until then, she’ll be getting guidance from Stone, her new mentor, and she’s happy she could help the Special Equestrians organization.

“I’m really glad I could ... do this art for such a good cause,” Allen said. “It’s an honor, really.”

\$71,000, with the rest of the money for equipment, training, fundraising and scholarships, Fifer said. For more information about Special Equestrians, call (239) 731-1212 or visit www.specialequestrians.net.

THE CHEFS

Pleasing the palates of those attending this year’s food and wine event will be:

- Chef Martin Murphy of Robb & Stucky KitchenAid Culinary Center
- Chef Danny Melman of Bonita Bistro & Bar
- Chefs Jane and Brian Baker of Jayne’s Victorian Garden
- Chef Norbert of Gulf Harbour
- Chef Brian Martin of EVOO Market & Bistro
- Chef Sherry Casillos of Blue Pepper Gourmet Market & Cafe
- Chef Karen Hutto of The Flying Pig
- Chef Norman Love of Norman Love Chocolates
- Chef Russell Heintze & Chef Paul Andrews of Sasse’s
- The Chefs of Bistro 41

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