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## Special Equestrians seeks new home

By JOSEPH A. GONZALES  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

Published by news-press.com on September 17, 2005

A nonprofit group that for 18 years has provided therapeutic horse-riding instruction to people who have mental and physical limitations is in an intense search to find a new riding stable.

By May 1, the group will be forced to leave its current location, Showcase Performance Horses Arena in North Fort Myers, because that arena no longer will operate as a boarding facility.

But Special Equestrians' board of directors president remains confident the group will find a new home.

"We're seven months away, but we'll find a place," Jan Fifer said. "We're not going to shut down. That's not even an option. We couldn't do that to these kids. They'd be heartbroken.

"Our dream is to have our own facility, but we need a lot of donations and land donation because we just don't have the money to just go out and buy the proper facility and build a stable," Fifer said.

Special Equestrians has offered therapeutic riding lessons to hundreds of children and adults over the years from six locations. And this month, Fifer met with a woman who is interested in exploring whether she can help the group.

The potential benefactor has a 20-acre property with a barn off State Road 31, just the right size to board the nonprofit's eight horses.

"We gave her a list of certain things we need to operate the program and we'll see if they can help," Fifer said.

Some of those needs include sufficient parking, handicap-accessible restrooms, a fenced riding arena and walking areas.

"It's not a done deal but she's very interested in us and we are very interested in her," Fifer said.

That's promising news for Avonda Levy of Fort Myers. She learned of the program two years ago and enrolled her then 6-year-old son, Jeremiah. The Levys adopted the Haitian boy when he was 11 months old. He had serious deficiencies and underwent various therapies to build his speech and physical skills. He also is autistic and has Tourette's syndrome.

"He was scared to death to talk with anyone and he couldn't follow simple instructions," Levy said.

Jeremiah has achieved drastic improvements since joining Special Equestrians, said Levy, a registered nurse and now a volunteer member for the nonprofit group.



Andrea Basler, 4, bids farewell to King after a riding lesson recently with Special Equestrians at Showcase Performance Horses in North Fort Myers. STEPHEN HAYFORD/news-press.com

### GET INVOLVED

Anyone interested in becoming a Special Equestrians volunteer or certified rider can call 731-1212, 822-7680, or visit the Web site.

A training day clinic is planned for October or November, and a three-day rider-certification program is scheduled for April.

Certification also requires about six months of preparation in advance of the April event.

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"The first time he went around that arena I cried," she said. "Now, he's made relationships with the volunteers and other children, he cares for the horses and he can follow instructions. He's really come out of his shell."

Jeremiah's self-confidence has improved significantly, she said.

"He didn't have that before," she said. "Now he's talking to people, and his motor skills have improved as well."

Those are the kind of results Fifer has seen time and again since becoming involved with Special Equestrians in 1999.

"We have seen riders progress to taking their first steps unaided, speaking their first words, sometimes their horse's name, and beginning to relate to the world through the relationship with a horse," she said. "It builds balance, increases flexibility and inspires confidence.

"Sometimes it just gives an individual a fun recreational outlet that they never dreamed possible."

In addition to a new home, Special Equestrians also seeks donations and volunteers to make the program work. The nonprofit's \$100,000 annual operating budget comes mostly from private donations, and is used to pay a monthly boarding fee, now about \$350, as well as for horse feed, salaries and other expenses. Riders pay a \$10-per-lesson riding fee, if they can afford it.

To assist riders, there are some 50 active volunteers and two paid staffers, one a certified instructor and the other an administrative position. More volunteers are always needed, mostly those willing to walk alongside horses and their riders, as well as those qualified to lead animals around the arena.

The group serves about 50 "clients" from Lee, Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties, with the remainder on a waiting list to take part in any of the 45-minute lessons offered three days a week.

"We're working very hard to add a riding instructor so we can serve more people," Fifer said. "There's a lot of need in our area. I get calls (from prospective clients) and have to put them on a waiting list."

Like Fifer, Levy is confident the group will find a new location in time to keep the program running.

"It's upsetting, but it's probably going to be a blessing because we want to enlarge and serve more people," she said. "If we can find something bigger, we can probably provide more classes. Of course, you need volunteers and money to make that happen.

"We're hoping someone will take us under their wing," she said.

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