

## Special Equestrians tries to provide stable homes

By Amy Sowder

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children and adults, yet Special Equestrians Inc. horses have no permanent home of their own. The nonprofit program for therapeutic horseback riding, which involves people ages 2 to 92, rents stalls for eight of its 10 horses at Showcase Performance Horse Stables, on 35 acres near the Lee County Civic Center in North Fort Myers. The other two horses stay at volunteers' homes. The program owns the ponies and quarterhorses that have rested their weary heads at six locations since 1987, when the program began, said Jan Fifer, Special Equestrians president. They hope someday to purchase 20 acres and construct a facility there. But it's a pricey proposition -- the facility alone would likely cost \$1 million or more, Fifer said. "We're hoping the next stable will be our own," Fifer said. "We have to set up the entire area and break it down every time because we're in a boarding stable."

Something has to be done soon, and that requires money, organizers say. Program officials are resorting to creative ways to fund their dreams of a permanent residence, such as encouraging high school art students to compete for the rights to be the poster artist for a coming fundraiser. The winning poster for the benefit, Taste of Love 4, will be chosen later this month.

The goal of the 2007 benefit is to sell 250 tickets to raise \$60,000, said event co-chairwoman Barbara Carlin. This year, organizers sold 200 tickets, netting \$43,000. Carlin said she was surprised at the interest of the students at Cypress Lake High School's Center for the Arts. "We thought they would roll their eyes, but the kids were on the edge of their seats," she said. The students learned that through horses and riding, the program helps people develop self-confidence, improve concentration, self-discipline, joint mobility, posture, balance and coordination. It is accredited with the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. 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 \$71,000, with the rest of the money for equipment, training, fundraising and scholarships, Fifer said. Looming over their fundraising efforts is the overall challenge of finding a stable home of their own for the horses.

Even the temporary location at Showcase stables threatened to be unavailable when code enforcement shut it down this summer because it wasn't permitted for training horses. However, Special Equestrians was allowed to remain for its boarding and therapeutic purposes. Maryann "Mare" Halucha, owner of the 35-acre stable, said everyone has to work around each other's schedules, which is not ideal because "horse people" like to have complete control. Halucha helped the organization with lodging because she already knew the organizers. She volunteered with Special Equestrians for five years. "I got to see kids come in barely able to walk, and then they were able to ride," Halucha said. "To see the progression is rewarding." 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. Art student Alison LeGros, 18, was inspired when she heard of the program. "Some of the stories they told were really touching," she said. Alison recalled the story of Emma Ravish, an 8-year-old girl with no legs who had to have a special harness to ride her pony. "Now, she doesn't need one. For her to have that independence," Alison said, "I mean, wow." Hundreds of people have benefitted from this alternative type of therapy in the last 20 years.

Alec Hoskins, who was born with Coffin Lowry Syndrome, can't talk or hear, let alone ride a bike or throw a ball. But when his mother, Sandra, enrolled Alec in Special Equestrians and watched her little boy atop the pony, Whiskers, his smile said volumes. "I never heard my son speak louder," his mother said in a thank-you note to the organization. "He has no conception of days or time, but Alec will run off the school bus and go straight for his riding pants and boots."

\* The temporary home of Special Equestrians -- Showcase Performance Horse -- is located at 860 Palm Creek Drive, off Bayshore Road near the Lee Civic Center. For more information, call 229-4895.

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

For more information about Special Equestrians, call 731-1212 or visit the Web site at [specialequestrians.net](http://specialequestrians.net).