

# Residents Lead Therapy Horses to “Help Make Miracles Happen”

*By Sandie Fauriol*

Many of us are familiar with the healing powers that animals can provide to humans. Therapy dogs bring smiles to shut-ins, dogs and cats can help lower blood pressure when we pet them, and our companion animals can even help speed the healing process. Therapy horses are perhaps the largest animals to “help make miracles happen,” which is how the Special Equestrians, a North Fort Myers charity, describes the healing powers of their eight specially trained horses. Special Equestrians is a therapeutic program designed for physical and mental therapy through horseback riding.

According to their brochure, “doctors, therapists, schools and residential homes refer clients with many physical and mental challenges including Autism, Spina Bifida, Cerebral Palsy, Blindness, Deafness, Downs



Syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis, and many others.” Approximately 50 students take riding lessons each week to help them with their physical rehabilitation.

Hérons Glen residents Jan Youngling, and Dick and Karen Sorenson, are frequent volunteers as horse leaders or sidewalkers. They help the students, ranging in ages from 2 to 72 years old, stay balanced on the horse as it walks or trots around the ring. Jan has been involved in Special Equestrians for four years, and now helps out with fund raising, writing grants and letters of request. Prior to coming to our community, she and her

husband, Bill, owned a horse farm near Louisville, Kentucky, where they bred Arabian horses. Jan has been around horses all her life, but “you do not need to have any horse experience to volunteer at Special Equestrians,” she noted.

Karen signed on as part of her Beta Sigma Phi Sorority’s service requirement, and Dick joined her. “I started out to support Karen, but I immediately got hooked on helping the riders,” he said. “The kids react to the horses in such special ways, and we get instant feedback on our help,” he continued.

Special Equestrians is a nearly all-volunteer-run organization. Dee Hollander and a part-time Administrative Assistant are the only paid staff. Dee is a certified riding instructor with the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, and Special Equestrians has earned its Premier Accredited Center status. The organization has been in existence for 18 years, and Dee has been involved with it since the beginning. “It is amazing what happens when children, especially, connect with the horses,” she said. “I have seen kids who do not normally speak, say the name of their horse as one of their first words,” she further explained. Talk about making miracles happen!

Jan recalled another heartwarming story. "I saw one young person who was confined to a wheelchair, move to using a walker after a year of therapy riding. The riding experience helped to build this little girl's leg muscles, taught her discipline, and gave her confidence," she said. "We teach the children to ride, and to groom the horses, as a way to take responsibility for their therapy," she continued.

Pat Hohmann, another resident of Herons Glen, is a riding client on Wednesdays. She wrote a piece for the organization's Summer 2005 Hoofbeats newsletter that describes how much the riding therapy has helped her. "I had been in nursing for many years, but due to the ever-increasing disability from MS, retirement seemed to be the only option....Miracles do happen; I've seen it first hand. I attribute my improvements in daily living to the therapy the horses provide: for example, strengthening muscles I wouldn't be using because of MS restrictiveness, cognitive skills (trying to remember the commands to give to the horses, either verbally or physically so that you have a productive ride), and balance which is a big part of riding....After my husband's death a few years ago, I was hesitant of doing things on my own. Little by little, I've accomplished things and I believe a big part of that positive attitude can be attributed to Special Equestrians!"

Jan Youngling wants readers to know that "we always need volunteers at Special Equestrians, and of course we welcome financial help as well. We also need a new home and would love to have a donation of land by next spring when we will have to relocate from our current site at 17860 Palm Creek Road." If you want to come observe what they do, you may visit one of their classes, which are held on Wednesdays at 9 a.m., Thursdays at 3 p.m., and again on Saturday mornings at 9 a.m. If you want to volunteer, please call the office at 731-1212. Tax deductible contributions may be made payable to Special Equestrians, and sent to PO Box 61528, Fort Myers, FL 33906-1528. For more information, you may visit their website at [www.specialequestrians.net](http://www.specialequestrians.net). Jan, who currently serves as First Vice President of the organization, urges other Herons Glen residents to join her, Dick and Karen in helping to "make miracles happen" for children and adults alike.