

Classroom

Horses help the disabled lead full lives

By Diana Carr

Special to The Press

DURHAM — One couple has discovered their dream avocation requires hard work — but the benefits they reap are boundless.

"I never thought I would be here doing this. To be doing this with Roger — I almost feel guilty about how fortunate I am," says Lisa Harness, talking about the stable she runs with her fiancé, Roger Passavant.

Rivendell Farm in Durham, the source of this unbridled joy, offers therapeutic riding to handicapped children and young adults, as well as riding lessons to the able-bodied. As the name implies, therapeutic riding is a form of therapy that uses horses to help people with disabilities — physical, learning or emotional. The benefits include greater self-esteem, increased range of motion, better balance and coordination, and greater muscle control and strength.

Hippotherapy lessons are also available; in this kind of therapy, the movement of the horse facilitates the central nervous system of the client, thus helping to improve neuromotor function.

Set on 10 acres of what could only be described as "God's country," the farm is named after the home of the elves in "Lord of the Rings," courtesy of Harness' 15-year-old son, John. "Elves can talk to horses and they have healing powers," says Harness. "We have the whole cast. All our horses are named after characters in the movie."

Horses have played a central role in Harness' life since the age of 9 when, in exchange for riding lessons, she cleaned stalls at the stable across the street from her home. That was the start of a lifelong passion.

Since she was a teenager, she knew she wanted to have a place where she could introduce children, especially troubled ones, to horses. She talks about the healing that occurs around these magnificent animals.

"You have to take responsibility for them. You can't be thinking about anything else when



Catherine Avalone/The Middletown Press

Clockwise from top: Lisa Harness and her fiancé, Roger Passavant, are owners of Rivendell Farm in Durham. Emily Ball, 15, of Meriden, who has cerebral palsy, gets a riding lesson on Sierra. To the left is Stephanie Tomasino. Ball, on horseback, is held by head therapeutic instructor Lisa Kelly; Brenda Shapiro is leading Sierra. At right are Harness and Connie Corbet. At left are Tomasino and John Harness.

you're around them; they're all-consuming. That's what makes it so nice for kids who are troubled. When they are with the horses, they're not thinking about anything else. It's an escape."

Her dreams came to fruition when she and Passavant bought Rivendell Farm and one of their boarders asked if she could give therapeutic riding lessons on the property. With 35 horses (seven are theirs and the rest are boarders), three instructors for thera-

peutic riding, two instructors for regular lessons, and 10 to 15 volunteers, the operation takes a big chunk of their time, and they love every minute of it.

Harness lives in New Canaan, works during the week in Westport as a manager in real estate, and stays at the farm every weekend. Passavant manages the farm full time, putting in 12-hour days, seven days a week.

On the weekends, they get up

at 5 a.m. and feed the horses, then go into the house and get organized for the day. Lessons begin at 8:30, with Harness helping the instructors any way she can. Evening finds them back in the barn topping off the horses' water.

Says Passavant, "It's 9:30 at night, and we have no idea what we did between 8:30 in the morning and now."

They have no regrets, though, about the time or the expense.

"What rejuvenates both of us," says Passavant, "is watching the expressions on the children's faces. The smiles on their faces, and seeing how excited they are to get on the horses, makes it all worthwhile."

Adds Harness, "I'm not sure who gets more benefit — the children or the side walkers (teen volunteers who lead the horse and walk on either side of him).

They're able-bodied, and when they see a kid in a wheelchair, they realize how fortunate they are," she explains.

The therapeutic lessons have opened a whole new world for these children. The beatific expressions on their faces say it all as they are engaged in a ring toss, basketball, or an Easter egg hunt, all on horseback.

The program has certainly enriched the life of Emily Ball, who has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair. She says she feels happier and more independent and free. Her mother, Julie, is delighted with the changes she has seen in her young daughter.

"This gives her so much freedom. It's wonderful to see Emily on the horse, unrestricted and not in her wheelchair, grinning from ear to ear. She's the happiest I've ever seen her. She's getting the benefits of physical therapy, but she's also having so much fun. It has really boosted her self-confidence."

The children aren't the only ones receiving stellar care. The couple feeds the horses five different grains, depending on what each horse needs, and puts in supplements with the feed that they don't charge the owners for. They have taken in horses in dire need and restored them to health. "No one takes care of your horse like you do, except us," says their advertising campaign.

Passavant, who does not ride and says he has no interest in doing so, is content with playing with the horses in the pasture and giving them plenty of TLC. "I once told a boarder, 'I don't know a lot about horses, but I know a lot about your horse.'"

For information, go to www.rivendellfarm.net.