

A therapeutic ride is just good horse sense

Like a lot of boys, 10-year-old Declan Edwards-Clayton loves superheroes, and their particular skill at making everything right with the world. When things get tough, he always asks, “Who’s going to save the day?”

“We all agreed that the RTES [Richmond Therapeutic Equestrian Society] saved the day,” says Declan’s mother, Melissa Edwards-Clayton. “It’s totally changed his life,” she continues, describing the benefit that therapeutic horseback riding has brought Declan since he was diagnosed with congenital myopathy, a condition that results in reduced muscular function.

Introduced in the 1950s, therapeutic riding has helped countless others as well. Much more intuitive than any machine, horses can provide an unequalled range of motor and emotional stimuli. Therapeutic riding also has a wide range of treatment applications, from mechanical injuries and muscular degeneration to cognitive and behavioural conditions, as well as many others.

Founded in 1995, the nonprofit Richmond Therapeutic Equestrian Society offers semi-private instruction to children and youth. Lessons, based on English riding, are held at the society’s facility at Twin Oaks Farm off No. 3 Road. There are sessions year-round, plus three summer camps.

After an assessment and a physician’s referral, a prospective rider can visit the facility to meet the horses. For some children, “it takes a little bit longer to feel comfortable around the horses,” says program director Sandra Evans. “Some of the kids are quite fearful to start with, but they very quickly learn to develop the trust in the horses and begin to develop a bond with them.”

Once they become part of the riding program, they have plenty of human support as well. Each rider has a volunteer walker on either side, as well as a leader who guides the horse. Overseeing the team is an instructor,

certified by the Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association. “They’re watching the rider and conducting the lesson,” Evans explains, “and they’re also keeping an eye on the side walkers and the leader to make sure everything’s running safely. It’s quite an involved process.

“We have just two riders in the arena at a time,” Evans continues. “That enables us to pair the riders quite carefully. We’re matching their level of ability with their needs, so that they get the maximum benefit from their riding. We start with exercises to develop the balance, the coordination, the strength, and all the priding skills they’ll need. Once those are in place, we can start teaching the riding skills.”

For beginners, the riding starts at a walk. As the training progresses, a trot can be added for those who are interested and for whom it’s suitable. Some riders, like Declan, progress to posting (rising and sitting in rhythm with the horse’s gait), and some advanced riders even reach the point where they can guide the horses independently, without the support of side walkers.

As with most nonprofit organizations, fundraising is a necessity for the Richmond Therapeutic Equestrian Society. While the City of Richmond supplies some funds, therapeutic riding is not covered by B.C.’s Medical Services Plan, and the society’s operation depends on the generosity of donors. There is a waiting list for new riders and, as Evans explains, “There is an awful lot of fundraising that needs to happen. Lesson fees really only cover 15 percent of what it costs to operate the program, and it’s an ongoing thing, trying to bring in the money to keep it going.” Volunteers are also a key part of the process: “We could not do this without them. For every brand-new rider in the program, we need three volunteers. Horse experience isn’t necessary; we’ll provide the training.”

The society has five horses: Ben, Dandy, Ginny, Harley, and Victor, ranging in age from seven to 24 years old. Some are leased and some are donated, but they’re all highly trained and

Health Doug Sarti



At Richmond Therapeutic Equestrian Society’s farm, it’s a gentle walk to health benefits for rider Carter Reid (with, clockwise from left Michelle Reynolds, Sandra Evans, Rob Larsen, and Joan Thomas).

make great partners for the riders. “They’re all wonderful, wonderful horses,” Evans says, “chosen primarily for their dispositions, their tolerance, and their gentleness.”

Describing the horses, Edwards-Clayton says, “There’s something quite calming about the connection that makes the person involved in the program so much more open to the learning aspect and rising to the challenge.” And it’s that sense of openness, and the relationship with the horse, that opens the door to countless physiological and mental benefits: “It can help to develop balance, coordination, improve strength and muscle tone,” Evans explains. “For kids with autism, it helps with sensory integration. For riders who have physical disabilities, it can improve the mobilization of the trunk and pelvis. The social benefits are absolutely huge, everybody has a wonderful time, and it’s a very positive experience—self-esteem really improves.”

As it has with Declan, Edwards-Clayton says, “It’s incredible as to how far it’s built his self-esteem. It’s really improved his quality of life, as far as his body functioning in a much more healthy manner.” Declan’s success with riding has brought benefits to other parts of his

life as well. She adds that before the program, Declan couldn’t really walk anywhere because he would be in so much pain.

“But because of the strengths he’s built up through therapeutic riding, he’s totally motivated,” Edwards-Clayton says. “He goes out and plays with the other kids now, and that was something that he couldn’t do before.”

Says Evans, “Just hearing the families’ perspective, the impact of the program on the kids, it’s absolutely amazing—you can really appreciate how much it means to the riders and their families.”

Speaking to Edwards-Clayton, it’s easy to understand her enthusiasm for the program and for the many rewards it’s brought to Declan. “Without the riding, nothing else would have happened. It’s like a domino effect,” she says, linking Declan’s riding to the improvements in his life. “What you witness at RTES is the connection between the kids and the horses. The self-confidence and sense of accomplishment that come with developing that unique set of skills and developing that connection with the horse—it’s a remarkable and truly inspired program.”