

Richard and RTES *By Ruth Shannon*

Richard was born with a genetic condition, and the prognosis for development was not good when he was diagnosed. At that time, it was not known just how much he would be able to learn to do, or be able to do for himself. Learning to walk was not a goal that the medical profession could really see him accomplishing. He did not walk until he was three-and-a-half years old, and when he did, it wasn't so much a walk as he would get up on his feet and "run for all his worth." For a long time it seemed that this was the only way he could hold his balance.

Then came Richmond Therapeutic Equestrian Society (RTES). I signed him up and he was assessed and began riding when the program began.

He was just five years old and still in preschool when he began riding. Within a few months, both his teachers and I noticed that there was an ever so slight change in his cognitive level. He seemed to understand what we were saying to him, and tried to do what might be asked of him. Because of his severe intellectual delay, these changes

were ever so slight, but enough for those close to him to notice. Over the years, and in conjunction with private gymnastics lessons, his balance has improved tremendously. At the time he started riding, he would bump into walls and doorways so much that he had to wear a helmet for protection. Within a couple of years, the helmet was not needed any more.

Learning to sit still was another one of Richard's goals, and being on the horse provided this opportunity. During his therapy time, he would have to sit still while the horse was standing still, for short periods of time. It took awhile for him to be able to do this, but over the years, that ability has transferred itself to other settings, most importantly, school. He has gone from not being able to sit still at his desk for even five minutes, to being able to sit and look at books, at his desk, for up to 30 minutes at a time! This is a major accomplishment.

His cognitive understanding kept on improving, and he is now able to do simple chores at home, without any support. Doing the therapy on the horse had given him the confidence that "he can do it!" and the skill to follow simple instructions.

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Therapeutic Riding Association (NFTRA) on Remembrance day. NFTRA has a three month trial policy for new horses entering the program. A horse

that seems "bomb proof" and generous in its home surroundings and with people it knows may not be as suitable when relocated and handled by many different volunteers. It usually takes about three months to acclimatize and

train the horse to be able to handle the challenges of its new job and for the instructors to determine whether the horse will enjoy the work and the attention, or resent it.

The first week of the trial period the horse is handled only by instructors/trainers. The horse is schooled under saddle and toys and games that will be used in the lessons are introduced. These are added gradually and only introduced at a rate that the horse can tolerate. Daisy watched with interest as we shook, rattled and rolled all of our spooky objects, and other than perhaps wondering if we were all a little crazy, had no reaction at all.

NFTRA uses an overhead lift to mount riders with limited mobility. This is something that takes a long time for many horses to accept. In fact, some are never comfortable enough with it for the program to use them for riders who require this type of mounting assistance. It makes a humming sound and the sling that supports the rider hangs from a carrier which slides with a different noise on a track above the horse. Most horses need lots of encouragement to stand and wait patiently as this noisy intrusive gadget seems to attack them from above. Again, the instinct to flee has to be suppressed.

When Daisy was introduced to this lift, I directed her attention to the bar

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Richard is a very stiff child, and is not relaxed enough to maneuver about, but when he is on the horse, he is so completely and totally relaxed! It is great to see him so totally relaxed the moment he mounts the horse!

Richard is very indifferent around animals, but he absolutely lives for horseback riding on Monday mornings... so much so that very often he cannot concentrate at school because he knows he is going horseback riding! When the other students in the class learn that this is where Richard is going on such a regular basis, they get all excited for him... he is doing something that most of them do not have an opportunity to do. On the other hand, this is one of the few activities that he does get to do because he cannot do team sports like so many of his classmates. His classmates encourage him on with his horseback riding: "You are so lucky, Richard." Many



Richard began riding at the RTES when he was five years old.

Photo: Ruth Shannon

of the students ask me what he does when he's riding, so I tell them, and then they are quite inquisitive and very interested to see photos of Richard on the horse.

It is my dream that Richard will continue to enjoy the benefits of therapeutic riding, and some day may be able to go riding with a group of other young people, along with an experienced leader. Richard will

always have to be in the care of an adult, but if some day this could be an activity that could be shared together, it would be wonderful. ■

and sling above her, as she would not hear the sounds and would have to be aware of what was going on around her. She looked up as if to say, "Okay I see it. What is the big deal?" She stood quietly, as always.

After a week of training, the new horses are brought into the riding classes and are ridden by our more accomplished riders with disabilities that are not likely to concern the horse. They are handled by many dif-

ferent volunteers and are prepared for their job gradually. At the same time they continue with a schooling program with a trainer. Daisy's introduc-

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I SHOOT HORSES

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