

Lexington and Gilbert students & “Dream Riders” find togetherness

As Jennifer sees it! “Dream Riders” a therapeutic equestrian program, serving people with special needs, located in Lexington, has developed a partnership with both Lexington and Gilbert High School’s Service Learning c/asses. This partnership has allowed Dream Riders’ special equestrian program to grow in the number of athletes/clients served from the beginning eight to the present 22 athletes/clients, with hopes in the fall to increase the numbers to 40 athletes/clients served. One would ask, how can this partnership with a high school class help increase the Dream Riders program size? Answer, the students from the Service Learning c/asses become the specialized trained volunteers needed in order to offer Dream Riders c/asses during the daytime hours.

Jennifer Self, a Lexington High School Service Learning class volunteer explains the partnership best with her own story as she sees it.

“I stepped out of French class into a mass of Lexington High School students, chaotically swaming to arrive at their second block destination before the bell. As they moaned, on their way to classes like English and Calculus, I was singing a different tune. I was one of four lucky students with a much brighter fate. My immediate future involved horses. It sounds too good to be true, but it's all part of my Service Learning class.

Service Learning is a class that allows students to spend one block (90 minutes) a day as a volunteer at a site of their choice. Students choose to work at places like LICS, the government office, nursing homes, elementary schools, and the sheriff's department. Students are required to turn in a journal entry for each day at their site and a timesheet each week. This year, Service Learning students have been given the opportunity to volunteer at an organization called Dream Riders, and some have jumped at it.

Dream Riders is a therapeutic riding program for individuals with mental disabilities. Lessons and classes are led by Jennifer Dyer, with the support and aid of her parents, Lewis and Corky Dyer. It operates out of Sunrise Farm, the family's home. The Dyers have always had horses, and Jennifer has taught lessons for several years. It was Jennifer who came up with the idea of Dream Riders. Part of her inspiration for the program came from her brother Lew, who has Cerebral Palsy with mental retardation. She wanted to design a program that would use horses to help build self-esteem, skills, and muscle coordination for people with mental disabilities. Dream Riders has proven to do all of these things and more. It teaches the athletes responsibility, pride, and social skills, but most importantly, it brings them joy.

After much planning and hard work, the Dream Riders program debuted October 1998. The first session lasted until Dec. 1998 and was a success. It was celebrated by a square dance that was held for the athletes, their family members, volunteers, and board members. Dream Riders is not just horseback riding. It also incorporates parties, outings, and classroom lessons about horses to help the athletes develop social skills and build self-esteem.

The current session at Dream Riders has been even more exciting than the first. It has been especially exciting for the Service Learning Students at Lexington High School. With an increase in volunteers, Dream Riders has been able to grow to 22 athletes. It is absolutely necessary to have enough volunteers present, at each lesson for the safety of the athletes.

During the lessons, volunteers, lead horses, sidewalk with the athletes, or spot from the center of the ring to watch for any emergencies, while Jennifer instructs the class. Jennifer's mother, Corky, happily jumps in whenever she is needed to assist in instruction.

Horse shows and competitions are held periodically to allow the athletes to show off their skills and to be recognized for their accomplishments. This allows them to establish goals and to work diligently toward those goals. Opportunities to compete greatly build the athletes' sense of self-esteem and accomplishment.

Lessons in horseback riding are not the only things that are taught at Dream Riders. Lessons in responsibility are also taught through horse grooming and barn maintenance activities. Athletes and volunteers, alike, must be happily willing to brush horses and scoop poop. They also do chores such as horse bathing, saddle cleaning, and tacking (putting the saddle and bridle on the horse). These things may not sound like much fun, but the athletes go into their work with such joyful hearts that it even rubs off on the volunteers, who soon find themselves humming a tune along with the athletes, while cleaning horse mess.

While the athletes at Dream Riders are the ones that benefit most obviously, students that volunteer are also learning a lot. Working with individuals with mental retardation teaches great lessons in patience, understanding, and perseverance. Students learn to be optimistic and thankful as they face hurdles in life from watching the athletes' persistence as they strive to rise above their apparent limitations that they battle. The students form a close bond with the athletes, and they learn to appreciate people with disabilities and see all that they have to offer society.

The excitement never seems to abate at Dream Riders. Even with the end of the second session, there are plans for summer camps in 1999. These will be held the weeks of May 24-28, June 14-18, July 12-16, and Aug. 2-6 from 6 p.m. until 9 p.m. each day. Volunteer beginner riders from the community will be paired up with special needs riders for lessons in riding and stable management. The age brackets will be eight through 14, 15-21, and over 21. If interested in becoming involved as a volunteer at Dream Riders, or donating horse show clothing, equine equipment, or tax-deductible monetary contributions, contact Jennifer Dyer at 957-7906.

Dream Riders has opened a door of opportunity for many individuals, including the riders, volunteers from the community, and Service Learning students. Everyone learns and grows through this program, which teaches lessons in horses and lessons in life."