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Support life-changing therapy

Giant Steps Charity Classic and Grand Prix Gala raise needed funds for therapeutic horse riding programs

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People from all over the Bay Area travel to Giant Steps Equestrian Center in Petaluma each week to spend time with a special kind of therapist — one with four legs.

Since 1998, Giant Steps has provided therapeutic horse riding to patients of all ages who have a wide array of physical and mental challenges such as autism, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries, stroke, developmental issues, bipolar disorder and attention-deficit disorder.

Giant Steps also has a therapeutic riding program for at-risk youth in partnership with a number of different organizations such as Mentor Me Petaluma and Social Advocates for Youth.

"It's an absolutely amazing form of therapy that has done incredible things in people's lives," said Lissa Ferreira, development associate for Giant Steps. "It just never has ceased to amaze me what happens to people when they get on a horse."

Horseback riding is a unique therapy for those with physical problems in that it's the only form of therapy that re-creates the natural gait of a human. Ferreira said that this type of stimulation has been seen to greatly improve many physical problems.

"A lot of people don't realize that," said Ferreira. "On a horse, the hips move the way they're supposed to. The neuropathways in the spine are stimulated and open up, and begin telling the muscles what they need to do. This is why kids who come to us who could not walk well before are running now. Patients who couldn't speak well before are now speaking. This kind of therapy is not just fun; it's a crucial form of therapy."

The year-round North American Riding for the Handicapped Association accredited programs are tailored to the specific needs of each client and consist of 10-to-12-week sessions with the same horse and set of volunteer instructors. The clients also get to help with the grooming of the horse, which Ferreira said helps instill a sense of responsibility, particularly with younger clients.

"We have the capacity to serve 300 riders a week, but we need more funds to do that," said Ferreira. "It's expensive to maintain horses. We also don't turn away anyone who comes to us for help because of lack of funds. People often come to us and they're at the end of their rope. They've tried all kinds of different therapies, drained their accounts and don't know what else to do. We try to help everyone who comes to us. It's very expensive to have a single lesson. It would normally cost \$180, but we only charge \$50. Even that is expensive for some, so we have a sliding scale and scholarships. About 43 percent of our riders are on a full scholarship."



lee mclaughlin

Elijah, a client of Giant Steps Therapeutic Equestrian Center, is the 2010 Giant Steps Charity Classic's goodwill ambassador. Elijah was born with Spina Bifida, a disease that confines him to a wheelchair. Thanks to therapeutic horse riding, he's making great strides toward his goal of being able to walk.

Keeping their programs accessible to everyone in need is at the heart of Giant Steps Charity Classic and Grand Prix Gala being held through Aug. 8 at the newly built Sonoma Horse Park in Petaluma.

“The Sonoma Horse Park is a new state-of-the-art facility that has just been built for the purpose of hosting horse shows,” said Ferreira. “The Charity Classic is a five-day horse show, and on the fourth day of the show is the Grand Prix, which showcases the best of the best from the competition. Even though the horse show is a benefit, it’s a pretty major show because of the amount of prizes given out. We have people from all over coming, some as far away as Oregon.”

The Aug. 7 Grand Prix Gala features a horse show, a gourmet dinner by Park Avenue Catering, paired with Wilson Fleming Estate Wines, and a silent and live auction hosted by famous wine auctioneer Fritz Hatton. There will also be a riding demonstration by some of Giant Steps’ riders. Included in the evening is the opportunity to participate in Calcutta (horse betting).

This signature event is part of the Giant Steps Charity Classic, a five-day horse show where California’s professional and amateur exhibitors will compete for more than \$50,000 in prize money in events that will benefit Giant Steps.

A “Pleasures of Petaluma” event is set from 5 to 7 p.m. on Thursday, and will highlight local artists and their work exhibited alongside local restaurants and wineries.

On Friday Aug. 6, there will be an Ultra Motor A2B Ride & Drive, which combines show jumping with a rowdy vehicle obstacle course.

On Aug. 8 there will be a Hunter Derby, where professionals, amateurs and juniors will compete over an elegant course for a cash prize.

Admission to the daily horse shows is free. Tickets for the Grand Prix Gala are limited.

For tickets, call 769-8900. For more information on Giant Steps or the horse shows, visit www.giantstepsriding.org.

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