

Handicapped riding center gives riders hope

The Somerset Hills Handicapped Riding Center (SHHRC) in the Oldwick, section of Tewksbury Township has been improving the quality of life for children and adults with special needs for almost 40 years. The center was founded in 1972 by Octavia Brown, who first started it at her Bedminster farm. As the center's needs grew, the programs were moved to the current, 12-acre location during the mid-1990s. The 15,000 square foot complex includes a 14-stall barn with tack room, an indoor riding arena, a wheelchair accessible mounting area, equipment storage area, administrative offices, and an education/therapy room. The indoor arena enables SHHRC to operate in the evenings and during inclement weather. In addition, the center has a 160 foot by 200 foot outdoor riding ring that can even accommodate carriage driving lessons, which are offered in the spring, summer, and fall months.

For physically challenged individuals, there are many benefits

to therapeutic riding. According to Nichola Redmond, SHHRC executive director, "Riding a horse provides participants with freedom of movement, and the horse's movement stimulates the rider's body in different ways. This movement helps to strengthen muscles that can lead to improvement in balance and increased stamina."

For all participants, especially those that are emotionally and developmentally challenged, the emotional bond with the horse is a tremendous benefit. "The horses bond and accept each individual, regardless of what other people might see as their limitations," Redmond continued. "The bond between horse and rider al-

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HUNTERDON HORSE BEAT



The writer, a resident of Stanhope, owns a Morgan mare and spends time volunteering with equine organizations. In March 2006, Diana self-published her first collection of poems and in 2008, My Desert Sun, Diana's first children's novel, will be published. She runs the Web site at <http://horsewelfare.8k.com>.

lows these benefits to take place in a fun and challenging way. Equine-assisted activities bring the added benefits of socialization, new friendships, and an increased sense of self-esteem and independence to the rider."

The center currently has 180 participants each year (up to 120 every week), with 70 percent between the ages of 5-18 years old. These individuals have a wide range of physical, developmental and emotional disabilities, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Spina Bifida, Autism, Muscular Dystrophy, Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, Alzheimer's Disease, Multiple Sclerosis, and spinal cord injuries.

SHHRC is open to participants 12 months a year, six days a week. Sessions are offered year-round in two distinct programs: hippotherapy and therapeutic riding. Hippotherapy is a physical, occupational and speech therapy treatment strategy that utilizes the movement of the horse. It is conducted one-on-one with a therapist and the client on horseback. Therapeutic riding is recreational horseback riding in a group setting under the guidance of a North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) certified instructor, with assistance from trained vol-

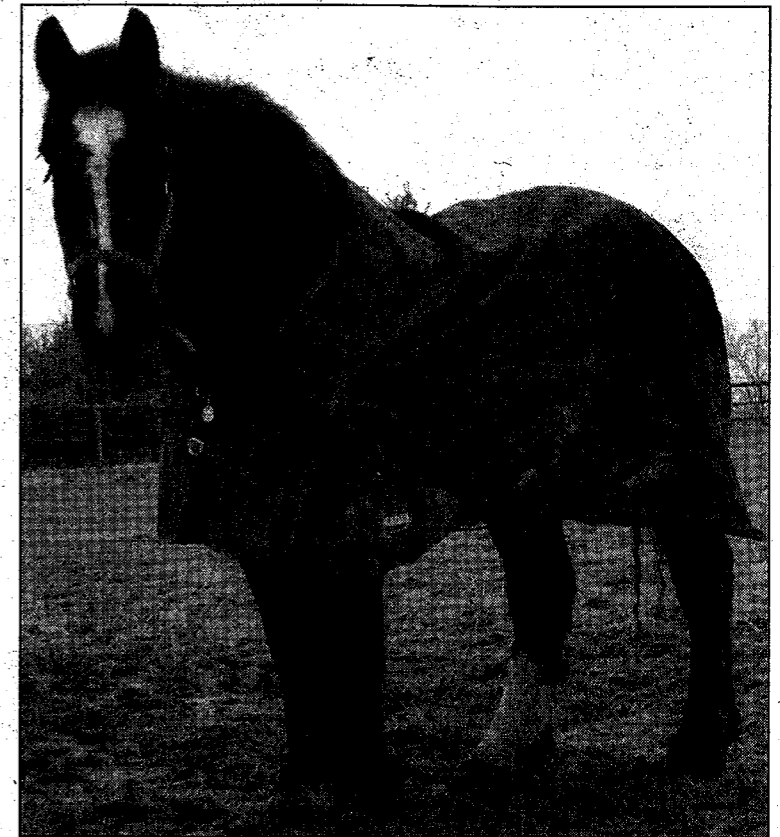


Photo By Diana Tuorto

Gracie is an 18-year-old Percheron mare available for therapeutic rides at Somerset Hills Handicapped Riding Center in the Oldwick section of Tewksbury Township.

unteers. Hippotherapy participants must be at least two years old, while therapeutic riding program participants must be at least five. Therapeutic riding lessons are \$40 each, with hippotherapy ranging from \$75-\$100 per session. Generally there is a waiting list, which varies depending on the program and availability of the participant.

Every summer, The riding cen-

ter offers Camp Cold Brook, a summer day camp open to children with physical and cognitive challenges, as well as able-bodied children, five years and older. The camp begins in late June and runs for six weeks. Siblings and friends are welcome and encouraged to attend, and aids are welcome to assist children with special needs. Campers learn riding and horsemanship skills and participate in horse-related activities. Camp Cold Brook is geared towards the beginner rider and is an excellent introduction to horses and riding in a safe and secure environment.

SHHRC is currently home to 11 horses. One of these special horses is Dunkin, a 23 year-old bay mare. "Dunkin came from a backyard farm where she occasionally gave pony rides for her owner," Redmond added. "She's been here for 9 years. Dunkin truly has a heart of gold and it makes her great at her job. She doesn't get upset at all by the repetitive nature of therapeutic riding. She is so kind and can be trusted with any rider."

While Dunkin has been giving her riders more confidence for years, she has also increased her self-confidence while working at SHHRC. "One interesting thing

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about Dunkin is that she didn't learn to canter until she was 21 years old! She's a late bloomer."

A non-profit 501(c)(3) charitable organization, The riding center is funded primarily by individual donations. The organization receives no federal, state or local government aid. To keep program fees at a reasonable cost for participants, and also offer scholarships to riders who cannot afford the fees, SHHRC must raise funds to cover 80 percent of their budget.

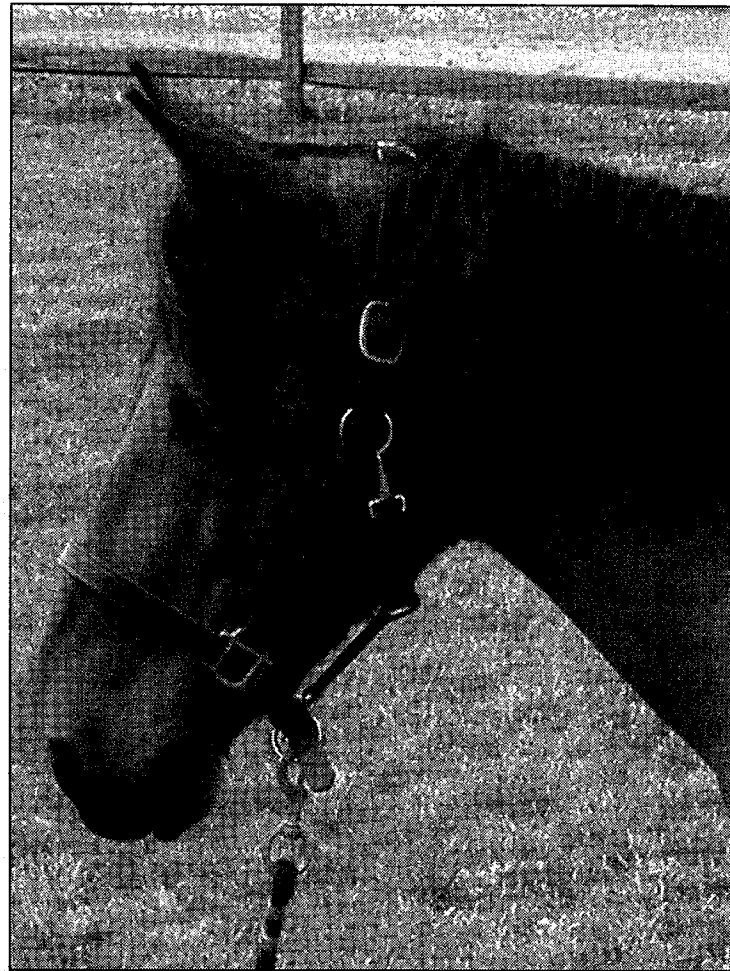
Both monetary donations and supplies are always needed and appreciated.

A few of the items on The riding center's current wish list include riding apparel (helmets, boots, breeches), rainbow reins, stirrup leathers, copy paper, paper cups and towels, laundry detergent, and MSM (Glucosamine-Chondroitin) and Cortaflex for horses.

Volunteers are an integral part of allowing the riding center to continue providing programs. "We have over 300 volunteers," Redmond said. "With our riding programs, we require at least 210 volunteers each week. Each year, our volunteers provide 18,000 hours prepping horses, working in the ring and on special events and projects. Riding center volunteers help to provide more than 2,700 hours of direct service. We are always looking for new volunteers."

SHHRC has several upcoming fundraising events for which they are in need of sponsors and volunteers. On April 28, a golf fundraiser will take place at Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster. On May 18, the riding center will be holding their annual horse show at their Oldwick facility, which is open to both program participants and other riders.

For more information on Somerset Hills Handicapped Riding Center, call Nichola Redmond at (908) 439-9636 or visit <http://www.shhrc.org>.



Dunkin, a 23 year-old bay mare, has been working at the Somerset Hills Riding Center for 9 years.

Comments Welcome

We're seeking Hunterdon County horse owners and riders to comment in several upcoming features. Two topics open for comments include how to recondition (or maintain) a

horse for showing after (or during) the winter months, and tips for coping with the loss of a horse. Please send your comments and suggestions for upcoming columns, to Diana Tuorto at lunar_aradia@yahoo.com. ▼