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Our Kids Learn To Dream on Horseback

Solomon makes Breanne feel safe, so she gives him a big kiss. "Solomon is my favorite," says this city girl from Erie Heights. That's saying something: little Breanne Straub, 11, who weighs all of 84 pounds, bossing around and kissing a three-quarter-ton behemoth, when in the city, the closest she's come to anything like that is taking care of a goldfish. And even at that, the fish doesn't listen that well.

Solomon may not be a "kicker," but he does kick - the HACE riding students at the Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center (TREC), 8352 Platz Road, Fairview, learned all about that. You don't stand or walk behind a horse, because sometimes, they kick with the rear legs to rid themselves of flies that land back there - they'll kick out a leg just to shake a fly off, and you don't want to be there when that happens or the horse could get rid of both you *and* the fly. (This is one of the few times in their lives that people are taught they must respect a horse's behind.), "On the very first day of class, the thing our kids are taught immediately is horse safety - both for themselves and the horses," says YMCA Kids Club Recreation Coordinator Cherie Kinem. In late July, Kinem took 10 young housing authority residents, aged 9-13, for four days of riding instruction at TREC. The lessons took kids who started with no riding experience and had them riding the trails in two days. They loved it. "If I was late in picking them up or if the weather was iffy, my phone would be ringing like crazy with kids asking if we were going riding," Kinem says.

"There is no greater experience than taking children from the city and putting them in an environment outside of what they're used to, such as farms, horses, country... and just watching them," she says. "You're looking on as these kids learn confidence and achievement, all in a matter of *four days*. These animals are *big!* Imagine mastering an animal that weighs almost a ton! The intimidation goes away and the confidence level

goes way up."

John E. Horan, HACE executive director, says, "How about seeing them riding with no hands? I was amazed. And I have to say I was a little taken aback because those horses are big! I learned that there's a lot more to riding a horse than just jumping on like in the movies. Our kids learned a lot of techniques that gave them confidence, and I'm sure that will carry over to other areas of their lives."

"Once again, Horan says, "as with our learn to golf, fish, and theater programs, we are trying to give our children experiences they would not otherwise have, to give them a window into a larger world that they will want to become part of. They seem to thrive on various experiences."

"I love just watching the horses," says Breanne. "They get to go out in the big yard (urban-speak for "pasture") with other horses. Play around. Be horses. And I get to be a kid."

How do you foster a sense of self-sufficiency and break the cycle of poverty? "You get people out into the world, as children, so they want to go back to that big, beautiful world as adults and not settle for less," Horan says.

