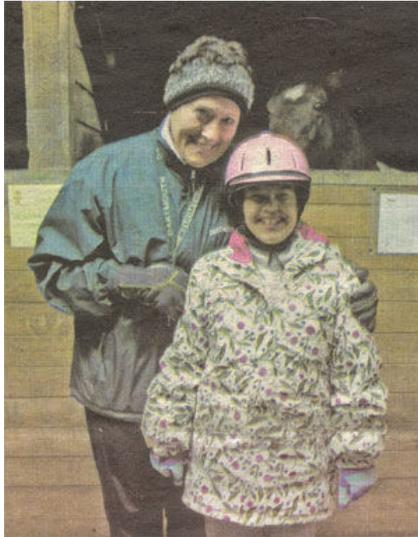


Winter Riding at TREC on Nino

By Trill Dreistadt

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She stands beside him, impatient with excitement, while he finishes the last of his dinner oats and the evening spreads out against the January sky. “Ready?” asks her instructor. “You bet!” she enthuses. Together they lead her school horse Nino to the mounting block in the center of the arena. Pink-helmeted and jacketed and sporting the sassiest, pointy-toed cowgirl boots this side of Missouri, she eases into the saddle for the evening’s lesson.

Fifteen-year-old Kelly Anne, daughter of Erie’s Judge Libby Kelly and Charlie Witchcoff, has been a client of Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center (TREC) in Fairview since she was six. “For several years in the mid-eighties I began volunteering here for Junior League service hours,” explains

Libby. “Because of Kelly Anne’s involvement, I began volunteering two years ago; Kelly Anne and I love to come out here together and be a part of the team.”

Her instructor Pam Dlugas, a 16-year veteran volunteer, explains TREC’s mission. “We serve the community by providing safe, assisted equestrian therapy for children and adults with emotional, social, intellectual, and physical disabilities such as autism, Downs syndrome, cerebral palsy, or learning disabilities.”

Students are grouped according to ability. “Because Kelly has advanced to the degree that she is able to steer Nino by herself, we place her with more advanced riders so she has the opportunity to progress,” Dlugas explains. She and Beth Racine, executive director of TREC and 28-year veteran volunteer, accompany Kelly Anne out into the arena where an obstacle course designed just for her is strategically coordinated and will be the focus of this evening’s lesson.

So advanced, in fact, is Kelly Anne that she will be participating as an equestrian at the Pennsylvania Special Olympics in State College this June. “She rides down on a bus and stays in the dorms,” Libby explains, “with chaperones who will guide the athletes through the various schedules of the Games.

Tonight, Kelly Anne’s lesson includes circling a triangle of cones, stepping over ground poles, trotting in a circle, and riding without the assistance of side walkers. Her smile is radiant as she sits tall and straight and proud in her English saddle; she knows that not only can she accomplish these challenges but that it will be so much fun!

During a short break, I have the chance to walk beside Kelly Anne and Nino for a horse chat. We have to, of course, talk about the boots! “Got these for Christmas from my mom!” Kelly Anne proudly exclaims, yanking up on her jeans so I can be impressed by the whole-boot view! What’s the best part of riding? I ask. Kelly’s response is quick: “Fun!” I ask if she feels pretty good up there on Nino tonight. Kelly confirms that she’s “freezing but loving it!”

The emotional therapy these riders experience from hands-on access to the “gentlest, most patient, kindest horses on earth,” Dlugas continues, “is absolutely remarkable!” She recounts the story of a young mute boy who, after a few months in the saddle, began talking. And the teenage girl whose muscles constricted from muscular dystrophy began to heal over time as the warmth from her horse pervaded her bareback saddle pad.

“Our riders develop skill in the areas of balance, motor skills, and following instruction” Dlugas continues, “that impacts their lives as they also develop self-esteem and social interaction.”

The program began at TREC 30 year ago as a fledgling initiative that provided three classes one day a week serving about 21 people. Currently, over 200 clients participating in six classes a day held six days a week benefit from the therapy offered. Because of the special accommodations that have been added to the program over the years, such as a horse –mounting wheelchair ramp and a rider lift that places paralyzed riders into the saddle, greater rider access is possible.

Racine is confident in the safety and reliability of the TREC school horses. “Each prospective horse comes to our facility on a 30-60 day trial basis where trained equine experts observe the horse in every aspect of behavior and temperament. Any horse we accept must be gentle, dead-broke, patient, and steady around noise, ramps, wheel chairs, horse toys,” she explains. And all 11 of TREC’s current horses have passed this test with blue ribbons!

She continues, “Let me tell you about our horse Chester. Right in the middle of class one evening he just stops and refuses to move another inch even with our gentle prodding. Thirty seconds later his rider had a seizure; Chester knew ahead of time of the danger and was just getting us ready for it.”

Volunteers at TREC experience a strong sense of community, commitment, and friendship. Looking for a place to find all this and help youth and adults experience it too? Contact TREC at 814-474-5276 or visit www.TRECERIE.org.

Kelly Anne’s lesson is over for this evening and again she stands beside Nino, rainbow reins in hand and lead rope at the ready. She leads him into his stall for a biscuit treat and a well-earned rest. The winter sky looms large over Kelly’s dream: another magical ride on her trusted friend Nino.