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By Roger Grody

RIDING HIGH

Therapeutic horseback riding is changing the lives of physically and developmentally disabled children and veterans.

Appreciating the profound relationship between horse and rider, Sissy DeMaria-Koehne founded Give Back for Special Equestrians in 2013 along with Dr. Heather Kuhl and Isabel Ernst. The organization raises money to provide therapeutic horseback riding scholarships for children and veterans suffering from physical or

encouraged equestrians to give as little as a dollar every time they paid their boarding fees. Give Back for Special Equestrians currently provides funding for therapeutic facilities including Good Hope Equestrian Center, Stable Place and Special Equestrians of the Treasure Coast in Florida, and Gallop NYC in Queens. DeMaria-Koehne hopes to

He adds, "Hosting a fundraiser for an effort with such beneficial outcomes is very rewarding!" According to DeMaria-Koehne, everybody in the organization, from graphic artist to accountant, is a volunteer. "Nobody takes a salary, and, beyond minor operating costs, all funds raised go right back to serve these special needs riders," she says.



Chloe Peebles, Don Peebles, Katrina Peebles and Donahue Peebles III



Give Back for Special Equestrians' Volunteer Day

developmental disabilities — whether it be autism, cerebral palsy or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) — so they can enjoy the benefits of horsepower that heals.

"I was approaching a milestone birthday, and even though I raised three wonderful daughters, I was thinking about how else I might want to be remembered," says DeMaria-Koehne, president of Kreps DeMaria Public Relations in New York and Miami. "I'm proud to be a good mother and grateful to have enjoyed success in business, but I believe we're called upon to do more to pay forward our blessings." When DeMaria-Koehne, whose love of horses began at an early age, saw how individuals with physical or developmental disabilities responded to therapeutic riding, she knew she wanted to play a role.

DeMaria-Koehne, who reports equestrian therapy dates back to the ancient Greeks, originally named the organization "Give a Buck for Special Equestrians," because her initial fundraising effort

eventually expand her organization nationally.

These remarkable facilities offer extraordinary services for special needs equestrians, but often do not have the resources for effective fundraising. DeMaria-Koehne's organization holds regular galas in the Hamptons, as well as at the Winter Equestrian Festival outside Palm Beach, Florida each year. With influential board members like Georgina Bloomberg (world-class equestrian and daughter of former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg), the organization continues to grow and attract high profile sponsors like Rolls-Royce.

Last summer, prominent real estate developer Don Peebles hosted a fundraiser at his Bridgehampton, New York estate that raised \$50,000 for Give Back for Special Equestrians. Inspired by his daughter Chloe's love of horses, Peebles reports, "She helped us learn about the compassion, strength and courage of horses and how horses having these qualities can heal humans and bring joy to their lives."

Some riders are children who are totally non-verbal, explains DeMaria-Koehne, but recounts moments shared by Dr. Peggy Bass, executive director at Good Hope Equestrian Training Facility, who has seen the miracles of this therapy at work when young riders, previously non-verbal saying the words "giddy up" to their mounts. She further reports, "After spending their life in a wheelchair, when they get onto a horse they feel like they're on top of the world. They're literally walking and standing tall!" Horses selected for special needs riders are quiet, docile and patient, and tend to be older. "People with autism are often non-verbal, but so are animals, who communicate through their energy," explains DeMaria-Koehne.

"I still get excited about helping our clients succeed," states DeMaria-Koehne about her highly successful career as a public relations executive, but says of her nonprofit work, "This is different ... this speaks to my soul." 🐾



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