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PEOPLE

To children in need, she's a hero

By Cate Coulacos Prato, 12/14/2003



Imagine you're the parent of a special-needs child - one with a spinal-cord injury or cerebral palsy - and you're told that the best therapy for your child is to get on a horse. Some parents would understandably recoil from such a suggestion, but horseback riding has become an accepted and encouraged therapy, according to Debby Sabin Kanzer of Lincoln, founder of the Lovelane special-needs horseback riding program in Weston and Lincoln.

In fact, far from being afraid to let their children participate in the program, parents often jump at the chance, Kanzer said.

"Parents will do anything to help their child. When they hear [the program is] going to be beneficial, they do it," said Kanzer, a registered occupational therapist and former Special Olympics equestrian team coach.

Last month, the Boston Celtics presented Kanzer with their Heroes Among Us award, honoring her for helping more than 500 children forget about their physical challenges and experience success while receiving physical therapy.

Kanzer said horseback riding helps people who have difficulty walking learn - or relearn - the correct muscle movements through the horse's motion, which mimics the human gait. But the benefits of the therapy go beyond the physical, she said. Being outside, moving independent of a wheelchair, and just having fun like other children can improve a child's attitude about himself, his therapy, and his life.

"You can't separate the mind, body, and spirit," said Kanzer. "I know so many kids who have said their first words on a horse."

Kanzer's path to Lovelane began in high school when a car accident took the life of one friend and severely injured another, requiring intense physical therapy. The accident affected Kanzer profoundly, as did her Special Olympics coaching job while in college. She decided to put her equestrian talents together with her compassion for those with special needs and pursue a career in therapeutic riding.

In 1988, Kanzer went to 15 stables asking for space to start her nonprofit program, but met with disappointment until she was referred to Elsie Rodney, who offered Kanzer her Weston stables filled with grand champion horses. Now with a waiting list of more than 100 patients, Kanzer is building a larger, indoor facility, and earlier this month kicked off a \$4 million capital campaign with a ground-breaking ceremony in Lincoln.

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For more information on Lovelane, or to volunteer or make a donation, visit www.lovelane.org.