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## Lovelane: “Doing This Thing That I Love”

**I**N 1988, WHEN DEBBY SABIN KANZER (then Debby Sabin) was in graduate school, the Boston-area barn where she taught therapeutic riding part-time closed. Unwilling to let the program die, she started looking for another facility to house it. One barn after another said no—until the owners of a small place on Love Lane in Weston, Massachusetts, rolled out the red carpet, and Elsie Rodney, a Morgan trainer in the barn, offered the use of her horses to Debby’s special-needs students at no cost.

That welcome was the starting point for Lovelane Special Needs Horseback Riding Program, Inc.—and a continuation of the more-than-coincidental happenings that make Debby feel Lovelane was always supposed to happen. “I never had any ambitions for the program,” she says. “I was just doing this thing that I loved.”

Debby’s interest in physical therapy began as she watched a high-school classmate’s rehabilitation after a terrible car accident. She was still in college when she responded on impulse to an ad seeking a therapeutic-riding instructor—and was hired. Working with those students propelled her to pursue a graduate degree in therapy while she continued to run the riding program, making ends meet with a doughnut-shop job that meant her day started well before dawn.

After earning her Master’s degree (she’s now a certified and licensed occupational therapist and a certified therapeutic-riding instructor), Debby first supported herself with part-time jobs as a “mainstream” (hospital- or clinic-based) therapist while running Lovelane. But “everything else paled by comparison with my passion for this program. There was enough demand that I kept going, then more demand, a waiting list—I started hiring people. . . .”

The program that had five students in 1988 now operates in two locations

(a barn at her own home and one owned by Elsie Rodney); one full-time and nine part-time instructors plus fifty volunteers work with some sixty disabled riders. (Lovelane’s hallmark is individualized therapy goals for each student; some private lessons require a team of four: a leader, two side-walkers, and an instructor sitting on the horse with the child.) There’s also a waiting list of a hundred names.

Debby hopes many of those on the waiting list will be able to join the program once a new facility on a five-acre site in Lincoln, Massachusetts, is completed. (Construction started this winter.) The project, which entails a \$4 million capital campaign to pay for land, a barn with a heated indoor arena, and an endowment for maintenance, has been “such a snowball,” she says. “Wonderful people seem to drop from the sky. A grandparent says, ‘I’ll build you an indoor ring’; a parent says, ‘Let me help you figure out how to do this.’ The energy keeps going until you say, ‘OK, we’re going to make it happen. We’ll figure it out as we go.’”

Reaching out to potential new sources of funding is hard work; so is making sure all pieces of the complex project dovetail. Offsetting those burdens, for Debby, is what the facility will mean to its users. “The barns where we operate now have no wheelchair-accessible bathrooms, nowhere for family members to sit and watch lessons. We work outside all year, and some of our kids have to stop in the winter because it gets too cold, which really interrupts their therapy. The new place will have full wheelchair accessibility and a heated viewing room for families.”

Debby’s voice rings with excitement as she describes how students’



Lovelane student Mary Elizabeth Rush, who has cerebral palsy, enjoys her lesson with help from program founder Debby Sabin Kanzer.

riding achievements carry into the rest of their lives. “Kids have said their first words on horseback, and they keep talking once they’re off the horse. A young adult with a spinal-cord injury has gained trunk control and become more independent, able to transfer from her wheelchair and dress herself. Students are so empowered by riding, they don’t even know therapy is going on or they’re working hard. Plus, you can never take away how much fun it is!”

Once Lovelane has a permanent home, Debby hopes to step back from her role as CEO of the nonprofit but stay involved with the therapy as program director. She also hopes to have a little more time to spend with her children, Sydney (two) and Leah (seven). “This has been a tough year, and they’ve been awesome. But I feel this is a gift I’m giving them: to have this in their life, to be comfortable with everyone.”

Last fall, Debby received a Heroes Among Us award from professional basketball’s Boston Celtics organization. **PH**

*To learn more about or to help Lovelane, visit their Web site ([www.lovelane.org](http://www.lovelane.org)), write to PO Box 716, Lincoln, MA 01773, call 781-259-1177, or e-mail Debby at [lovelanemail@aol.com](mailto:lovelanemail@aol.com). To learn more about becoming a therapeutic-riding volunteer or find a program near you, check the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) Web site: [www.narha.org](http://www.narha.org).*