



BRIGETTE VOELK



MAURA WAYMAN

“the horse never sees

LIKE THE YOUNGSTERS she instructs at Lovelane Special Needs Horseback Riding Program, Debby Sabin thrives on challenge. And just as her students—who struggle with conditions like autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, hearing and vision impairments, spinal cord injuries, cancer, and rare genetic disorders—grow stronger each time they ride, Sabin’s efforts to make the program grow have steadily gained momentum since its inception in 1988.

In 2004, Lovelane moved from a small stable in a backyard in Weston to a new five-acre site on Baker’s Bridge Road in Lincoln. The building, colored a soft green rather than bright-barn red, is set back from the road and blends into the bucolic surroundings.

“We try to be good neighbors,” Sabin said of the new facility that now serves more than 100 riders weekly drawn from 35 Boston communities. There is office space, a kitchen, therapy rooms, and handi-

left to right: Ashley demonstrates her confidence with hands on the hips. Maeve works on strengthening her trunk. Lovelane volunteer and board member Patti Ross sidewalks for Olivia Fiorentino’s lesson on Sebby. William smiles with pride.

capped-accessible indoor stalls that enable riders access to feed carrots to their favorite horses.

And it seems everyone has a favorite horse: be it Honey Bug, 21, an Appaloosa mare who stands at 15.1 hands; Chef, 14, a black Percheron, 17.2 hands, whose gentle disposition and quiet manner make him useful for both lessons and the vaulting program; or Spike, 9, a Fjord at just 14.2 hands. Friendly and playful, his breed was developed to be stout but able to carry full-grown men. Many different sizes—and temperaments—of horses are needed to accommodate the spectrum of riders at Lovelane who start as young as 18 months on up through age 22.



BRIGETTE VOELK



BRIGETTE VOELK

my differences

BETSY LAWSON writer

Riding program builds strength and self-esteem for special needs children and their families

The jewel of the facility is the heated indoor arena that allows for safe and comfortable, year-round riding. It also plays host to horse shows and special events such as last fall's birthday party celebrating the fifth year in the new facility. Overlooking the arena is the viewing room replete with murals of horses, comfortable couches and a bulletin board chock full of odds and ends. Parents and siblings can watch lessons and talk with other families who also are navigating the often tumultuous and exhausting world of raising and caring for children with special needs.

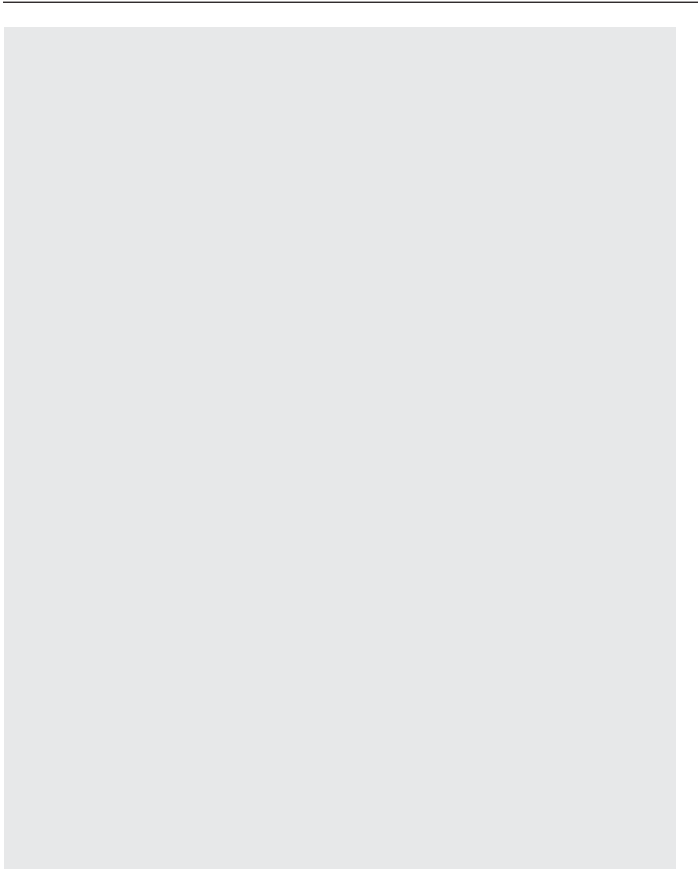
For Teri Adler and Jeff Lazzarino of Wellesley, Lovelane is a place where their daughter Alexandra is not defined by her disability, but

rather admired as a rider among riders. Her lessons are a welcome break from all the doctor visits and other traditional therapies. "Allie has issues with paying attention, [but for] that half hour she is completely focused and does what the instructor tells her," Teri said. "It's the most focused she is all week."

Just as important is how eager their younger daughter Anna, who does not have special needs, is to bring her friends to Lovelane and brag about her big sister the horseback rider. Grandparents Elinor and Barry Adler of Wayland often come to watch lessons and never miss the student horse show in May. Allie has won blue ribbons that she proudly displays in her room.



MAURA WAYMAN



Joe and Roberta Murphy of Sudbury also speak of how their son Sean's self-confidence and physical skills have grown by leaps and bounds since he began riding at Lovelane. Therapeutic riding combines occupational, physical and/or speech therapy. The horse's gait mimics the human gait, stimulating neurological function and sensory processing, including the part of the brain that controls speech.

The Murphys said they are encouraged by how staff and volunteers alike have taken such an interest in Sean and seem to go out of their way to tell them how pleasant and sociable he is during his lessons and how good he is with the horses. As an older teen with strong riding skills, Sean is often one of the first students allowed to ride a new horse when it comes to Lovelane after careful selection and training, said Julie Clifford of Sudbury, who is both an instructor and facilities coordinator for the program.

Clifford said being able to identify as an athlete—as a rider—can give students like Sean, who has autism, a stronger sense of belonging. Peer relationships that begin as students ride alongside one another in the ring can transcend into friendships outside of Lovelane as well, some-



BRIGETTE VOELK

*left: Lovelane founder and instructor
Debby Sabin with Silvie Lammert.*

*right: Christian Rojas gets his blue ribbon
at Lovelane's Annual Horseshow.*

thing that has been a joy for the Murphys to watch. As was Sean's speech at the Hoedown II fundraiser in 2006, in which he talked about his favorite horse and his passion for riding in front of 750 people.

Through tremendous fundraising efforts and generous donor gifts, Lovelane raised the money needed to build the new facility in Lincoln and start a small endowment to cover ongoing expenses that, whenever horses are involved, seem endless. Farrier costs (hoof care) alone can exceed \$15,000 a year; hauling away manure another \$5,000.

But each year, Lovelane must still raise



more than \$450,000 to meet its operating budget. Many unfamiliar with the program, however, will hear “horses” and “Lincoln” and picture an exclusive program geared only toward affluent families. In reality, about 40 percent of Lovelane’s riders receive some form of tuition assistance as most insurance plans have yet to cover therapeutic riding.

Insurance notwithstanding, many care providers do now recognize its benefits. They’ll work in concert with Lovelane staff to draw up goals specific to each child—all while maintaining appropriate levels of privacy regarding the child’s medical condition.

A grant from the Boston Scientific Foundation several years back helped to furnish equipment in the therapy room. Lovelane is continuing to reach out to potential sponsors and to look for unique partnerships, said Jennifer Siedman, major gifts officer and self-described “grateful” parent of a Lovelane rider. One such partnership has been with Mother Caroline Academy in Dorchester to pilot a program that brought a class of 6th grade girls out to Lincoln to experience riding horses—both indoors and out.

Lovelane Special Needs Horseback Riding Program in Lincoln is a non-profit organization that relies on grants, individual and corporate donations, and tuition to meet its operating costs. It does charge for lessons, but 40 percent of riders receive some form of tuition assistance. Even at the full rate, tuition does not cover the true costs of acquiring, boarding, and caring for Lovelane’s 12 horses.

Here are creative ways you can help:

- * \$12,000 “Adopt” a Lovelane therapy horse for a year.
- * \$5,000 Provides a full scholarship for a full year for a disabled rider.
- * \$3,000 Provides a year of hay, grain, and bedding for one horse.
- * \$1,500 Maintains one riding ring for six months.
- * \$750 Provides new therapy toys for one year.
- * \$250 Provides one month of veterinary, dental, and farrier services for one horse.
- * \$100 Provides one fully funded lesson for one child.

For more information, visit: www.lovelane.org or call 781.259.1177, extension 22.

Lovelane has an outdoor sensory trail for more experienced riders that can also serve as a visual scavenger hunt of sorts, Siedman said. While outside, riders look for specially-placed items along the trail and are excited to communicate their “finds” to their instructors.

“Wheelchairs don’t go into the woods very easily,” Siedman said, making exposure to nature another of the program’s benefits. Unlike a doctor’s office or hospital setting, the trail ride is a “normalizing experience” for kids. So, too, is the summer workshop program Lovelane offers, a rite of passage so often denied to children with special needs.

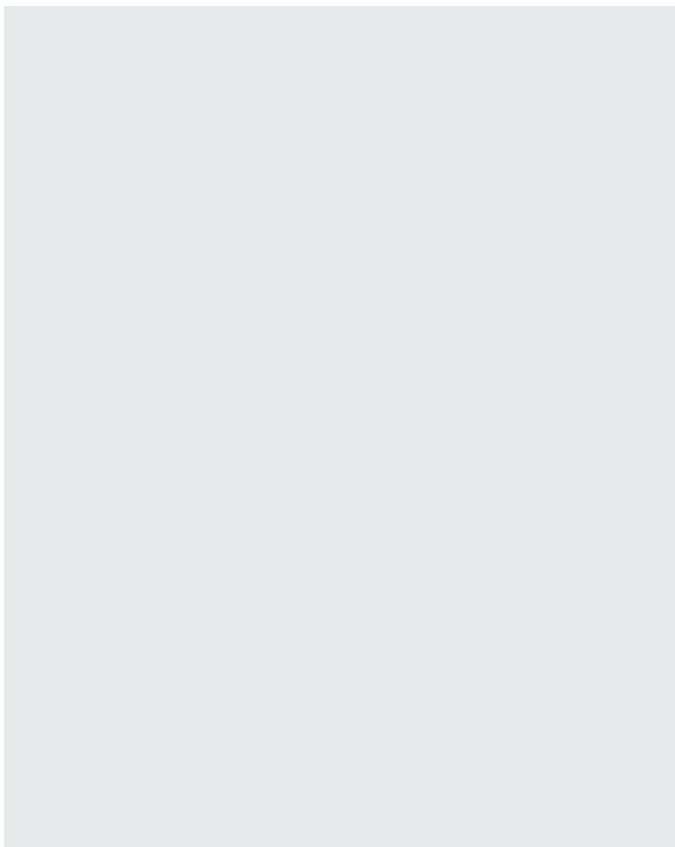
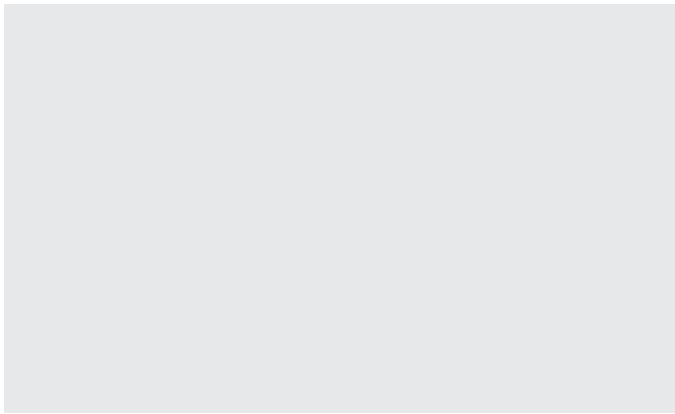
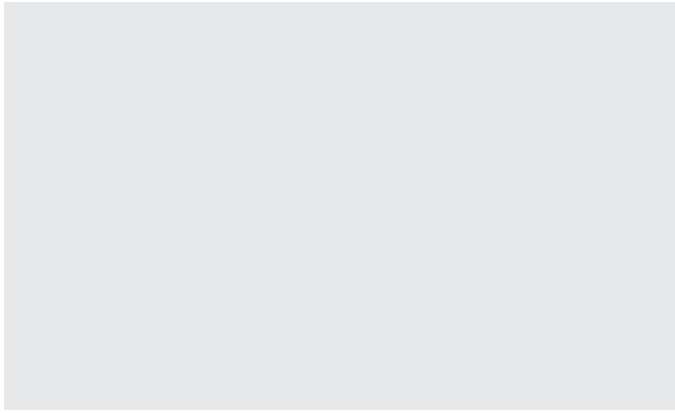
Lovelane is its volunteers

Ask any of the 140-plus Lovelane volunteers for success stories and heartfelt examples are quickly shared. A favorite is the uncommunicative child who mastered three hand signs by the end of his first lesson. The whole family then made it a point to learn how to sign.

To safely have a special needs child on a horse, three adult volunteers are often needed alongside the paid instructor: a walker on either side of the horse in case a child begins to slip or needs immediate assistance, and another to lead the horse. Without its volunteers, Lovelane would

Lovelane students and their siblings work together during a vaulting class.





Instructor Julie Clifford with student Brendan Whalen.

not have the manpower to offer its labor-intensive core program or interactive vaulting or the barn management class.

Interactive vaulting is where students perform exercises or maintain positions on the back of a moving horse or stationary vaulting barrel. The classes generate an energetic atmosphere where students not only build their physical strength, but also make social connections with their peers. The barn management class gets them mucking out stalls, feeding, and grooming the horses and other chores.

Cindy Powell of Sudbury has been volunteering at Lovelane for five years and is now an instructor. Powell said she is happy to do just about any chore in the barn, just like her “barn buddy” helpers as she calls those in the barn management class. As with most Lovelane volunteers, Powell knows just about all the riders and their families, and feels joy in their progress. And while she doesn’t play favorites with the kids, she has been known to slip extra carrots to a special horse or two. 🥕