

Outfitted with a brown velvet helmet and riding boots, Crystal Swift sits up straight in her saddle with the poise and confidence of an accomplished equestrian. As her horse trots, she posts like a pro and the look on her face makes it clear that she's hankering for speed.

After her lesson, she dismounts gracefully and with a little help from her riding instructor, grabs her cane and makes her way out of the ring to meet her mother with a smile from ear to ear.

But this is no ordinary riding lesson. Crystal, 12, is blind and explains matter-of-factly that she sees some lights and shadows. She is one of a handful of exceptional children and adults benefiting from Equestria, one of the innovative programs of the New York Therapeutic Riding Center (NYTRC), a unique organization in New York City. Now in its ninth year of operation, NYTRC's fall, winter, and spring programs for children and adults, and kids-only summer program allow city residents with a wide range of physical and developmental disabilities to spend an hour a week forgetting they have any special need at all.

Building Bodies and Souls

Susan Swift, Crystal's adoptive mother, believes her daughter's experience with NYTRC has helped her in her home-school education, social life and physical development. In fact, Crystal, who lived in a Chinese orphanage until the Swifts adopted her, has gone from speaking no English at all to reading and writing English and Braille at a fifth-grade level.

"When you home school a child, you don't know what to expect," said Susan. "The horseback riding has helped (Crystal) in her mobility classes (learning to walk with her cane). Her posture is 100 percent better than it was. She's more confident. She stands up straighter. When she's in church, she asserts herself more with the other kids, introduces herself."

Swift's only wish is that she knew about the existence of the therapeutic riding program sooner, and that Crystal could spend more time at it. She first learned of the program through Parents of Blind Children of New York, a division of the National Federation of the Blind of New York State, in September 2005.

"I never knew there was even such a thing," said Swift. "We had been looking for some kind of physical activity and thought of horseback riding because our older kids liked it."

Indeed, Crystal's first experience with horses was on her aunt's Vermont farm, which she visited with her family upon her arrival from China. She remembers the name of her first mount, Eclipse, and says when she first learned of the NYTRC program, the thought of riding in Manhattan excited her.

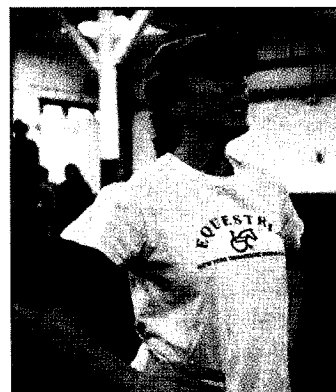
"I like how they feel, I like the saddles, and petting them," said Crystal.

Declan Byrne, 5, has epilepsy and underwent brain surgery two years ago. The combination left him with some speech delays, sensory problems and weakness on his right side. Declan is a patient at NYU Medical Center's Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine, where pediatric physical therapists

Grab Those Reins: Sometimes, Four Legs Are Better Than Two!

By Sibyl Shalo

Photography by Bill Bernstein



and physicians prescribe NYTRC's Equestria program for many exceptional children because they believe horseback riding benefits patients by:

- Relaxation and stretching of spastic and rigid leg muscles;
- Strengthening of trunk and back muscles;
- Diminished joint stiffness and rigidity;
- Reinforcement of normal movement patterns;
- Improvement in balance and postural alignment;
- Increased confidence and self-esteem.

Professional Consensus

NYTRC Executive Director Richard Brodie sees the physical and psychological results every week as he observes the organization's therapeutic riding instructor, physical therapist and numerous side- and lead-walkers work with the children. Kids (and adults) who have gone through the program have been diagnosed with various special health care needs. Brodie believes that just about any exceptional person can benefit from riding therapy.



"Our work over the past nine years in collaboration with major New York City hospitals," he said, "has demonstrated conclusively that therapeutic horseback riding plays a vital role in the rehabilitation of children and adults with a wide range of disabilities."

Matthew Lee, MD, Rusk's medical director, says: "Most of our patients have neurological problems. They suffer from weakness, altered sensations, balance and movement problems. Contact with animals helps children build confidence, which is essential to helping them feel as normal as possible. It also helps build strength, psychodynamics, readjust their equilibrium."

Leon Root, MD, attending pediatric orthopedic surgeon and professor of clinical orthopedics at Weill Medical College of Cornell University is a medical advisor to the NYTRC. He says the physical benefits are real for a range of patients, most commonly with cerebral palsy and spina bifida, and for those who, like Declan, have difficulty in sitting independently.

"As the horse moves, their bodies sway from side to side," he said, "so they're learning in space to move their bodies and that helps with trunk and neck control."

Root also thinks that for children with spasticity in their hip adductor muscles—the insides of their thighs—the horse's gentle movement allows basic passive stretching.

"Children learn to relax their muscles and use their bodies."

Nicole Yaris, PT, a physical therapist at Rusk, says that the program also serves as a recreational activity that allows kids to get involved in an activity that their peers without special needs might do.

"It builds their confidence, getting up on a horse, doing an activity that "regular" people do," she said. "That translates into all the activities in their lives and helps them keep

up with the other kids. I'm not sure who loves it more, the kids or the parents."

Declan's mother, Jennifer Purdy, agrees that the therapeutic riding addresses more than just physical problems. One of the most important benefits is the confidence and feeling of belonging that the kids gain through their progress in horseback riding.

"One of the biggest things for us was that Declan, for the first time, could do something outside of his physical therapy," says Purdy. "He got to do something new and different, something he was afraid to do at first."

Access Through Expansion

Crystal and Declan are fairly typical of children and adults lucky enough to access a therapeutic riding program. Although there are hundreds of similar programs around the country, the New York Therapeutic Riding Center is one that is serving the five boroughs of New York City. NYTRC's tuition for a ten-week course of weekly therapeutic riding classes is \$600, which is often too pricey for many families. But, financial support from JP Morgan Chase, Pfizer and Thoroughbred Charities of America, have provided scholarships to most of the children with special needs in NYTRC's summer program. During the past four years, the Rusk Institute sponsored 12 patients in the Equestria program, with help from "Kids of NYU," a special fund at NYU Medical Center that supports innovative projects and services to benefit children who are patients there.

Despite its generous benefactors and the dedication of its tiny staff and cadre of volunteers, the NYTRC can only serve a small number of children and adults because it doesn't have a facility of its own. Its capacity is restricted by the limitations put on its use of its current facility. So, Brodie and his volunteers developed plans for construction of a new, dedicated therapeutic riding facility to meet the growing demand for the program and a capital campaign has begun in earnest.

"More staff and horses, a dedicated facility, a six-day-a-week operation—all this would mean many more children with disabilities could be reached by this unique program," said one NYTRC volunteer. "It would be a wonderful opportunity, both for the kids and everyone else involved."

For more information, call NYTRC at 212-535-3719 or by email at brodie.equestria@pfizer.com. See related Products and services on page 92.

Sibyl Shalo is a freelance medical and healthcare business writer who spends time on horseback in and outside New York City.

Find Local Programs

The main instructor certification and program accrediting body for therapeutic riding is the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, Inc. (NARHA). Visit www.narha.org to see lists of accredited instructors and programs in your area.