

Equine therapist mounts cause for adult programs

Families in need only supported for children's therapy

By **GAYLE WILSON**
 gayle.wilson@lighthouseenow.ca
 @LHNOWnews

Patricia McGill of Hinchinbrook Farm Society has been giving equine-assisted therapy sessions for children with special needs ever since she moved to Blockhouse from Quebec nine years ago. Now she's looking to extend the program to cover adults with special needs, but she's finding a big hurdle in her way. There is little in the way of financial support for equine therapy for cash-strapped adults with special needs, or their families.

Coupled with that, she notes, is the general lack of recognition and regulation of equine therapy.

In offering the children's program, McGill, a trained therapist with more than 20 years of experience, has received support from the United Way and the Lunenburg Fishermen's Foundation. The ProKids organization helps cover the costs of her sessions for those children whose families cannot afford to do so.

There is "zero funding" on the adult side, McGill complained in an interview with LighthouseNOW.

"Not from Sport (Nova Scotia). Not from Mental Health, not from Health and Wellness, not from anything, because I've asked."

McGill says that unless adults with disabilities are competing at the Paralympic games, or something similar, there's no funding from Sports Nova Scotia for them to go riding.

"There is some stuff being done through Special Olympics, but why does everybody have to join Special Olympics?"

While the government is trying to promote a healthy lifestyle, it's not backing it up with programs for adults with disabilities to do just that, she says.

"Some of them have bodies of 50 year olds and they're, like, 29 years old. But they're aging at a phenomenal rate because their bodies were made to move, stretch, reach and re-balance themselves all day long. They won't get that sitting in a chair or in front of a TV.

"And a lot of the parents are aging themselves, and they don't have the physicality to look after them. But they're being required to."

Although equine therapy is said to date back to the early Greeks, its popularity has been increasing in recent years as health and welfare specialists are beginning to appreciate the therapeutic value in interactions with domesticated ani-

mals in general, and dogs, cats and horses in particular.

Equine therapy, also known as equine-assisted therapy (EAT), is a treatment that includes equine activities or an equine environment to help address physical, occupational, and emotional issues relating to a variety of conditions including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, autism, cerebral palsy, depression, genetic syndromes (such as Down syndrome) and behavioral issues.

Its proponents say it can help increase the rider's physical fitness and balance. They point out that a horse's rhythmic gait is similar to a human walk and that anyone astride a walking horse would be moving his or her hips as if they themselves were walking. Depending on the client, therapists such as McGill might also encourage the riders to undertake other stretching activities while on the horse, such as leaning across to pet the horse's ears or down to put rings on cones.

The horses used are highly trained and only those with a quiet, calm nature are selected as candidates.

Equine therapy also operates on the premise that these animals are highly intuitive and empathetic, and rider and horse often form strong bonds.

Margaret Hogg's 21-year-old son Alex is afflicted with both autism and Down syndrome. He started

with the Hinchinbrook program under the auspices of ProKids, which helped cover the cost of his sessions — \$360 for six — while he was in school. Now that he has left school, however, his mother, who works in a fast food restaurant in Bridgewater, struggles to keep him in the program. She's determined to keep him riding, though, and currently uses some of the money she receives from Community Services for a respite worker to help cover the cost.

Hogg said her son never showed any interest in animals, but immediately took to a horse in the Hinchinbrook program. "That first time, he just got up on it," she told LighthouseNOW. "I never thought that would happen, but he did. He totally did."

"I would never want him to stop going there," she said, noting that her son is getting exercise, he's more physically flexible, and a lot more confident and happy.

"He just loves it," she said.

Equine therapist mounts cause for adult programs

THERAPIST continued from page 10

As well as funding for equine therapy programs for disabled adults with limited income, McGill said she would like to see broader recognition and regulation of equine therapy.

"Unfortunately there isn't a licensing body. There should be... people started coming to me and there were all kinds of horror stories where kids with cerebral palsy were put on horses and the horses bolted." The equine therapist explains that children with cerebral palsy have spasticity in their legs. "And so when their legs go spastic the horses think it's a cue, a button, to go faster."

She refers to someone with spina bifida as another example.

"You put him on a great big fat horse, on a great big fat western saddle, and you would think that would be great because he would be so safe up there. You'll dislocate both his hips." She says someone who knows about spina bifida recognizes that not all horses are suitable.

"It has to be a skinny horse," insists McGill. She says astride a narrower horse the rider has the potential to strengthen his or her muscles and ligaments and in a way that's not working with the bone.

McGill, who received her training through the Quebec Equestrian Federation, explains that as a therapeutic riding instructor she knows not only the progressions of learning to ride safely, horse management and training, but also about specific disabilities, how to manage them in respect of equine therapy and which are not suitable for it.

"So I choose the horse and the activity astride the horse. How much help the person needs. What adaptive equipment is needed for them to get astride a horse. That's my domain as a therapeutic riding instructor."

But she concedes there is no licensing for that in Nova Scotia.

"I have a book of training and it's this thick," she says, indicating with her fingers as though the book is a large text book. "And it's like, 'So what?'"

"We need to have licensing so people aren't putting these people on horses and they don't know that they're doing. And hurting them."

"I would like to see people with adults be able to get from community services or health and wellness a stipend every year to do sports activities in a supervised, safe way with good people," says McGill.

"There is some stuff being done through Special Olympics, but why does everybody have to join Special Olympics?"

Patricia McGill
 Equine therapist

THERAPIST continued on page 11