

HORSES WITH HEART: ORINDA'S GENTLE HEROES

By Virginia Fox, Guest Writer

For Cocoa, Pooh, Kiwanis and Bandit, life in Orinda couldn't be better. As specially trained horses for Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center, these gentle and sensitive animals help disabled youth, aged 5 to 17, conquer fears, build confidence, and develop physical and mental skills.

Set on three acres of picturesque countryside off Valley View, Xenophon provides a nurturing learning environment for forty students with challenging disabilities like Autism and Cerebral Palsy. Individual lesson plans, games and school based programs help students astride horses learn sequencing, numbers, and colors while experiencing independence and freedom of movement. Activities also develop muscle tone, coordination and sociability. Xenophon is the only accredited (NARHA) therapeutic riding center in Contra Costa and Alameda Counties.

"New students often have strong fears about getting on a horse," says Executive Director, Judy Lazarus, Orinda resident and founder of Xenophon TRC. Trained and licensed staff members introduce students to their horses, then use games and activities like petting the horse or putting a stuffed animal on the saddle to build a relationship between the horse and child. Once they're ready to mount, they are accompanied by a team with a horse leader and two side walkers.

Our horses are very special," Lazarus says. "When we put a disabled person on Cocoa, she knows it and can tell the degree of disability. If the person is severely disabled, she moves like she's walking on eggs." Program participation often leads to behavioral breakthroughs. When Harry, a six year old boy from Orinda, came home from a riding lesson his mother asked him how he did. "I am wonderful at horseback riding," he replied. "This was the first time he had said he was good at anything," Lazarus says.

As the parent of an autistic child, Lazarus was acutely aware how few recreational classes were available for the disabled. She founded Xenophon in 1993, naming it after the Greek general who wrote the first book on horsemanship. Three years later, Xenophon leased their Orinda site from PG&E. The riding center now offers class sessions from June – November and is supported by five licensed instructors and sixty dedicated volunteers.

One avid volunteer, Terry Murphy, Orinda resident and Xenophon Board

President, says: "When I want to know whether or not what I'm doing is worthwhile, I look at the smiles of the children on horseback and know this is what I want to do."

"Horses are incredible animals that make a person feel they can do almost anything," Lazarus says. "They don't care if you use a wheelchair or if you cannot speak. Their unconditional devotion is what makes therapeutic riding a joy for everyone."

Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center, 60 Don Gabriel Way, Orinda. OPEN HOUSE, Saturday, June 24, 1:00-4:00 PM

For information contact Judy Lazarus: Xenride@aol.com.

Website: www.xenophontrc.org.



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