

Every Little Bit will help the disabled

At Little Bits Therapeutic Riding Association, horseback riding is more than a hobby.

It's about feeling a sense of belonging, accomplishment, confidence and overall well-being.

"Our main goal is that persons with disabilities have a right to enjoy outdoor activities like horseback riding and have fun doing it," says Lisa Doyle, volunteer coordinator for Little Bits.

'HER SPEECH IMPROVED'

She explains that the non-profit organization is designed to provide disabled children, youth and adults with an opportunity to take part in an activity that provides physical and mental benefits.

Sharon Willey enrolled her six-year-old daughter Emma into Little Bits and noticed significant changes in her abilities.

"She has a speech delay and just after a few lessons, I noticed her speech improved," Willey says.

She describes how her daughter had to say certain commands like "walk on" to signal the horses to walk. "She loves riding the horses so she would do her best to say those words to get the horses moving."

Doyle lists other benefits like better muscle control, higher self-esteem and improvement in balance as just a few of the benefits from horseback riding.

A goal-setting element is also included to help enhance the experience so it becomes more than "sitting on a horse".

The goal could be something like riding in a circle by themselves, she says, and

once the goal is met, the rider gains a sense of accomplishment.

More importantly, Willey believes the organization offers riders a chance to break free from their disabilities.

"There, [Emma] gets to be a true child. We don't see her as special. We see her as a typical child riding a horse."

The organization offers three programs: Itty Bits for children ages three to five and a half, Little Bits for children ages five and a half to 18 and Big Bits for those 18 years and older.

The classes take place for 12 weeks in the spring and 10 weeks in the fall. During the classes, the organization relies on volunteers to help accompany the riders on the trails and groom the horses.

Doyle credits volunteers for helping the organization provide many services.

LOOKING FOR HELP

"We're always looking for more," she says. "You don't need to have any experience with horses or persons with disabilities. We don't ask you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable. We want our volunteers to be happy."

Aside from working with the riders and horses, volunteers are welcome to sit on committees and help with various fundraising projects throughout the year.

If you'd like to become a volunteer with Little Bits Therapeutic Riding Association, an orientation night is planned for March 25 at the Whitemud Equine Centre.

For more information or suggestions for story ideas please contact Evelyn Pham, communications coordinator, at epham@volunteeredmonton.com.



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