



Courtesy photo by Geoff Moore

Instructor Lisa Williams and Katie Farmer, 11, of Acton, both keep a tight grip on the reins as they gallop around the outdoor riding area at the Lovelane Therapeutic Riding Program in Lincoln.

Labor of love

Riding offers therapeutic benefits

By Geoff Moore

Correspondent

If enthusiasm, dedication and love were enough to put an end to childhood health problems, then Debby Sabin would surely have cured cancer by now. As it is, Sabin has done the next best thing through her work with the Lovelane Therapeutic Riding Program, which helps children and young adults achieve remarkable improvement both physically and mentally.

Sabin began providing therapeutic riding using an outdoor paddock at her home on Love Lane in Weston in 1988, with borrowed horses and limited funding. The program has moved and grown tremendously since that time, but the name stuck and Lovelane was officially incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1992. Now in Lincoln, the therapeutic riding center is located on a 5-acre lot on Baker Bridge Road.

Standing at the entrance to a 17,500-square-foot heated indoor riding area, Sabin watched 4-year-old student Olivia Crockton as she sat astride a gray horse, one of 11 horses at Lovelane.

Visually and hearing impaired, Olivia is unable to walk independently, but with guidance from volunteers and therapists, she can ride a horse.

"When Olivia first started, she was not talking at all. [But] after her first visit she was saying, 'Go horsey.' It was like something unblocked," said Sabin, as therapists held up yellow and red beanbags for Olivia to touch.

Sabin, who has a master's degree in occupational therapy, described Lovelane as a therapy-based program, as opposed to an adaptive recreational program for children with special needs. She said riding has many psychological benefits for children, which allow them to access higher levels of cognitive processing. Sabin said riding therapy is much more stimulating for children than therapy in a hospital setting because most hospital staff members do not have the time or the means to offer social or fun activities.

"[Riding] is so motivating. It's therapy, but it's very disguised therapy. They're coming for horseback riding and it's very different because

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it's outside and you're talking about what they can do, not what's broken about them," she said.

Shouts of excitement and congratulations drew Sabin's attention back to the arena, as Olivia reached out a tentative hand and touched the yellow beanbag as requested.

"That's the first time!" Sabin said as she clapped and added her own encouragement.

Olivia recognized Sabin's voice as she shouted for Olivia to show her again. Olivia obliged and a clearly delighted Sabin dropped her voice to a whisper and said, "We have a little love-fest going, us two."

Sabin said the parents also play an important role, calling them "the cream of the crop and a self-selective group."

"They don't look at their child and say, 'Oh my 5-year-old is in a wheelchair, they can't do this.' They bring their therapist so that we can supplement what they're doing. The communication is fantastic," she said.

Olivia's father Eric Crockton said he was pleased with his daughter's progress. Crockton said Olivia has been riding for just over a year and can now walk with the help of just one of his hands.

"She loves coming here — she's stronger and looks forward to it every time. They're doing a really great job," he said.

The gait of a horse is similar to that of a person and so the riding movement helps reinforce muscle memory, Sabin explained.

"Riding strengthens the core muscles. In a [non-riding] therapy session, we might be able to do that for five or 10 minutes. When she's riding, she is using those muscles the whole time," Sabin said.

Lovelane, one of 21 therapeutic riding centers listed for Massachusetts by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, has 106 children and young adult students, ranging in age from 2 to 20, and a waiting list of 200 more.

Turnover is low once a child is into the program. Due to the nature of their special needs, most children stay with the program until parents move or until the child becomes an adult and physically too large for the horses and therapists to manage safely. Making the decision to discontinue a student is always difficult, Sabin said, because for many of her "kids," riding is the highlight of

their week.

Riding in a sun-filled outdoor paddock, 11-year-old Katie Farmer of Acton put her horse through its paces as her mom Paulette sat in the sun with a broad smile on her face. Katie is in her fourth year at Lovelane after three years on the waiting list, her mother said. While waiting, Katie rode at another location but could not ride with the frequency and consistency the family wanted, Farmer said.

"From the time she was little, the first time she saw a horse, it was magic for her. When she began to ride at the previous location, she was just starting to speak and we could see that, just being on the horse, she was much more verbal, much more expressive and tuned in, and that carries on," she said. "It's the focus of her week. She can't ride a bike — she doesn't have the balance, but when she's on that horse, she feels she can achieve anything."

"There's also the networking. It's very empowering for parents to meet other parents of children with special needs," Farmer added.

Even as Lovelane continues to grow, Sabin said she wants to remain connected to the children and their parents. The program's 70 active volunteers play an ever-important role in the lessons each week as Sabin and her staff must divide their time between therapy sessions and operating a nonprofit organization.

Having completed a \$4 million capital campaign that allowed for the purchase of land and building of facilities, Lovelane's board of directors has launched an ambitious \$4 million endowment campaign, which to date has garnered contributions of \$1 million, Sabin said.

One of the most important fund raising events of the year is the Susan McDaniel Run for Love, which takes place on Sept. 15 in Weston. The family-oriented event is open to all and includes a "Diaper Dash" for toddlers, a "Kids Fun Run" and an adult 5k run/walk.

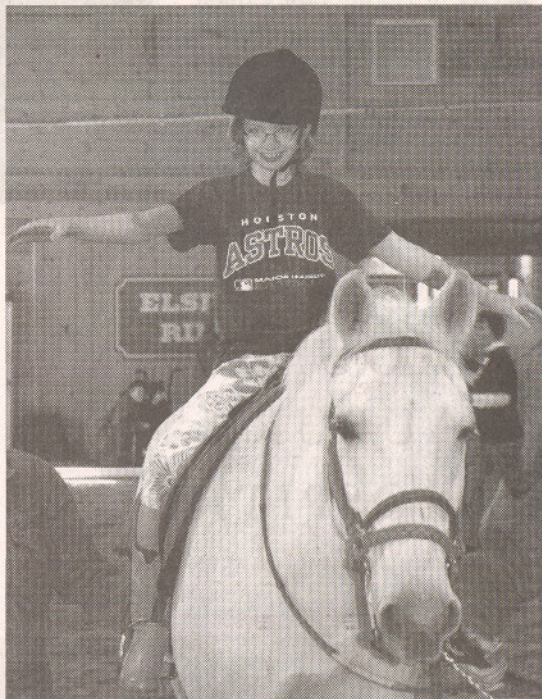
Sabin said that after some initial concern by residents, she believes that they have slowly been embraced as part of the Lincoln community.

"People are stopping in to see what we do and we feel settled here," Sabin said.

For more information about the Lovelane Therapeutic Riding Program, benefits, visit www.lovelane.org.



Courtesy photo
Martin Cummings, 7, of Dover, proudly holds up a ribbon he earned for riding at the Lovelane Therapeutic Riding Program.



Courtesy photo
Georgia Burns, 11, of Lincoln, finds her balance in the indoor riding arena at Lovelane.