

TRAILBLAZER TRAINING

IT'S NOT WHAT THEY DO, IT'S HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT WHAT THEY DO.



WRITTEN BY DEBORAH WEISS

Deborah Weiss has been creating and facilitating mental wellness programs since 2003. She combines equine-assisted therapy with client-specific therapeutic support.

This approach applies to all confidence-building activities, but it's especially borne out when doing equine activities with people with neuro-differences.

Horses at Heart is an equine-assisted therapy program at WaterStone Estate & Farms in King Township. For 20 years, the program has been supporting families seeking therapeutic counselling, adults with mental health challenges, at-risk youth, and children with autism. Highly regarded, the program is successful based on its equine therapy methodologies, which focus on meeting each participant where they are and ensuring they have a positive experience.

Students in the special education class at Huron Heights Secondary School in Newmarket regularly attend a Horses at Heart program called Trailblazer Training and it's hard to tell who has more fun – the students, the teachers, or the program facilitators.

Some students are eager to ride a horse on their first session while others are happier

to climb the mounting block and participate from a distance. In the Trailblazer program, no one is pressured to go further in the equine experience than what they choose in the moment.

The common approach of pushing past comfort zones to feel successful in an activity doesn't hold up if someone doesn't safe or confident in wanting to do so. Participants might want to ride the horse, but once up on the mounting block, it may seem too scary. They have a chance to reassess their comfort zone. If standing on the mounting block but not getting up on the horse is what they prefer, that's okay. The program facilitators make sure that their experience on the mounting block is a good one. They can be on the top step, close to the horse and stroke the horse's mane, hold the reins, and feel the saddle. The facilitator will talk about what a nice horse is it, and they can stay on the mounting block for as long as they like so that it becomes a positive experience – a successful experience.

Jullian Paulozza, a Huron Heights Secondary School student, is a participant in the Trailblazer Training program. For his first two visits, he chose to help with horse feed, sweeping, and grooming. His experience in those activities was met with

positive feedback and lots of high-fives. On his third visit, he surprised everyone and asked to ride. He didn't hesitate to climb the mounting block and hop on. Having observed some of his classmates ride, he had already learned to ask his horse to 'walk on' and 'halt'. He beamed as he joined the file in a musical ride.

"He would talk about the horses to his family at home or on the phone and show pictures of himself with the horses," says Taryn, Jullian's mother, who witnessed a positive change in her son's confidence and communication skills. "Riding to music in formations with partners was especially exciting for Jullian. His enthusiasm would last through the week."

Having participants respond positively to musical rides is no surprise to Horses at Heart facilitators. Musical rides are an essential component of the program, which integrates the *Horse Boy Method*, an equine intervention specifically designed for the nervous system and the brain, according to its founder Rupert Isaacson. Isaacson researched the science of equine-assisted therapy with neuro-scientists and adult autists and found that brain receptors involved in learning are activated when moving in rhythm on a horse, enhanced with

the addition of the auditory rhythmic cues of music.

Overall, creating an empathetic and supportive environment promotes engagement. Meeting the child where they are, not where we want them to be, encourages positive new experiences that keep the children and parents coming back for more.



• Huron Heights S.S. student Jullian
• with his mom Taryn, and Classy
• the horse.