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She's breathing easier and helping kids heal

ESTHER ROBARDS-FORBES

Amy Richards grew up on a horse farm in Pennsylvania with her parents, her younger brother and an aunt.

"As a child it was like a dream. It was a wonderful place to grow up and run and be yourself," she says.

Her favorite activity was riding horses.

Her parents and her aunt, a social worker, would bring children from group homes to ride and enjoy the farm. They knew what horses could do for children. Amy learned that lesson, too. When Amy was 7, her father was killed in a car crash while riding his motorcycle home from work. Her mother and aunt struggled but managed to keep the farm.

Three years later, Amy's mother and aunt were killed in another car accident.

After the accident involving her mother and aunt, Amy says, "It was like I could not breathe. I felt completely alone. It felt like I would never take a deep breath again, ever."

On the day of the funeral, she sought comfort in the barn with the horses.

"It really hit me that this actually happened," she said. "I was denying that it could even possibly happen because it was so terrible. I just went to the barn."

She said all she could think was, "My parents opened their home and their hearts to these foster children and my aunt brought these group home children out. ... I'm going to be one of them."

That was her first real conversation with God, she says. She asked, "Why?"

"There was a comfort because I was able to actually leave the barn and go to the funeral. I did get an answer – a vague, incomplete answer. I still feel that I'm getting the complete answer."

Amy and her brother bounced between three relatives' homes until they graduated from high school. During those eight years, her relatives got her to riding lessons as often as possible.

Amy says the horses were her connection to her parents and something constant. One of the keys to horseback riding is relaxed breathing, she says.

"If you don't breathe, your horse will not relax and you will hit the ground," she says. "One of the many gifts horses have given me is the ability to finally take a breath."

She tried college after graduation but says it wasn't for her.

"Everyone else seemed so normal and had parents coming to visit and care packages, and all those things that I really didn't get," she says.

Amy eventually took apprenticeships and worked at riding schools. She married, had two children and moved to Union County 12 years ago. Four years ago, she and her husband, Jonathan, bought eight acres near Waxhaw, which now houses Bridleheart Crossing Academy of Horsemanship.

Now she is opening her gates to children who know the pain of losing a family.

Champions program

On a bright Saturday morning at Bridleheart Crossing, volunteers gather outside the barn waiting for children from the Children's Attention Home in Rock Hill. A small bus pulls through the gates and out pile 12 happy, bouncing kids ranging in age from 5 to 16. This is the first time Amy has hosted a group like this.

Steven Matjasko, a volunteer with the home, catches a flying bundle of denim and brunette curls in his arms. This is one of the children he spends time with every week.

Matjasko is the one who called Amy and organized the visit. She leapt at the chance, and the

"Champions" program was born. The children now visit Bridleheart regularly for free lessons.

"The more experiences I can give them, the better. It'll give them great memories," says Matjasko.

Children at the home are often the victims of various kinds of abuse or neglect. Many live and go to school at the home and rarely leave.

At the farm, some children are shy. Others step eagerly into the stalls with the horses, grab brushes and get to work. Volunteers show them what to do. It's the first time most of the children have seen a live horse.

One girl, who looks to be about 15, hangs back, her hands and arms tucked inside her jacket. She says she does not want to touch the horse.

Her fellow students encourage her. By the end of the day, she will be riding the robust, black Percheron mare she is so reluctant to touch.

"When I visited the children's home, it brought back all these memories. I felt like I had come full circle," Amy says. "I could see myself in each one of the children's faces or where I could have been."

Amy knows what horses can do for children, from personal experience and from what she sees in her students.

"When you ride, you cannot focus on anything else but what that horse is doing. There is no room for thinking about anything else ... because if you do, you are going to be (hurt)," she says. "It makes you focus on the relationship with the horse and takes all your other worries away."

Horses also help students build self-esteem and confidence, she says. "If you can control a 1,000-pound horse and get it to do what you want, it makes you feel you have some control."

Giving these kids, who have lost all control, a small measure of it in the practice ring may be an important step toward healing.

Want to Know More?

If you are interested in helping with the CHAMPIONS program, contact Amy Richards at 704-254-0114.