No horsing around for local youths at horse camp

Dreams Become Reality For Kids In “Ride For Youth” Sponsorship Program

by Jeff Wolfe

A horse‘s size is measured in hands, but a program involving children and horses at Dream Park is being measured by how it changes hearts.

The Ride For Youth Sponsorship Program is allowing youths between the ages of 6 and 17 who might not normally find themselves around horses, not only experience what it’s like to ride a horse, but the responsibilities of caring for horses.

The leader of the program at Dream Park in Logan Township is Delia Apollo. She has experienced first-hand how being involved in the horse community can transform a life. And the joy for her, and eventually the students that come for a week-long camp this summer, is seeing a transformation take place in a matter of a few days.

“Riding is something that brought about self-esteem and friendship for me,’’ said Apollo, who did not grow up on a farm with horses. “It’s something I want to share with the kids.’’

The weekly camps took place during the summer and the groups were small, just six youths per week. However, that was by design as it allowed Apollo time to learn the personality of each camper and also the time to teach them the proper rules and responsibilities when being around and taking care of horses.

“I have to get into their heads a little bit,’’ Apollo said. “I really have to have them build a bond and trust with me first. We start out slow and grow toward riding.’’

Most of the kids at the camp have had little or no experience around horses, with maybe the exception of an occasional pony ride at local township festival or at a zoo. That was the case with Logan Township’s Dominque Burnett, a 9-year-old who loves horses, but had never had any hands-on experience with them.

But that experience changed due to the Ride for Youth Sponsorship Program.

“Camp was amazing since the first day,” Burnett said. “Camp got me really interested in horses and they taught me everything about horses. Miss Delia was very nice and I would really like to go again.”

“She always loved horses,’’ said Dominque’s mother, Lisa Burnett. “She was ecstatic to come, but she was worried because she hates flies. But she loved it so much, eventually the flies didn’t bother her.”

The Burnetts were referred to the program by Logan Township Mayor Frank Minor, who has been a big supporter of Dream Park, a facility that features 44 resident stables, five outdoor rings, a 150 by 300 foot indoor heated arena, and a 144 by 120 foot non-heated indoor arena, and several other amenities.

“Frank Minor is really behind the program and fell in love with the program,” Apollo said. “This is the first summer for it and it’s been great. Everything starts small and grows. It’s been a great experience for the kids.”

Apollo, who competes in the Mini Prix Jumping, makes sure she starts small when it comes to introducing the youths to riding. She has two 6 year-old ponies, Lucky and Elmo, which the kids ride first, when they feel they are ready.

“They’ve been with me for so long, my ponies are very sweet,” Apollo said. “It’s almost like they want to help the kids out when they start riding. I would never use horses that I don’t know.”

Safety is just one of the themes of each week. They learn the basic rules, like not to walk too

closely behind the horses, and are also provided with helmets by Apollo, who uses much of her own equipment for the program.

Lisa Burnett volunteered for a half day and it gave her a chance to see just how much the campers had learned.

“It was a real opportunity to see how much they respected and took care of the horses,” she said, “and to see how they paid attention to the safety rules. They would all look out for each other and they liked having that responsibility.”

Apollo’s main responsibility is getting to know the campers as some students take right to the horses, but others are a little more timid in the beginning. That’s why it’s important to have only a few per week.

“I like to keep them in small groups,” Apollo said, “so I can give them a lot of attention.”

Apollo makes sure the learning curve is appropriate for each camper. After introducing them to the ponies, once the campers are comfortable, they may sit on a horse in the stable, without going for a walk. Then once they feel secure sitting, Apollo will lead the horse and rider around on a slow walk. Then after more instruction, the student will be allowed to take a slow solo ride. This sometimes takes place over a three-day period, depending on the camper.

“ I always kind of have to figure the kids out,’’ Apollo said. “It’s all about potential and working at the child’s speed, not mine.”

But even with first-class facilities and a program in place, having the right person in charge is also a key element.

“They love Miss Delia and they respect her,” Lisa Burnett said. “At the end of the week, they made her a card that said ‘we love horses and we love you.’ They wanted her to know they appreciated her.”

With the program being less than a year old, Apollo and Minor are always looking for more sponsors. It’s one way for local businesses to give back to the community and help change it for the better by giving youths a higher self-esteem.

That’s something Lisa Burnett witnessed in her daughter.

“When I dropped her off at the start of the week, I had to tell her she’d be OK,’’ Burnett said. “When I came to pick her up, she didn’t want to leave.”