

## Reins of Life horse riding program helps people with disabilities

Reins of Life is a nonprofit equine therapy organization that works to make profound changes in its clients' lives.



WM. SHAWN WEIGEL |

Therapeutic Riding Instructor Tara Ziegler helps 21-year-old Daveon Wheeler remove a saddle from Skylar, a 14-year-old thoroughbred with former show and racing experience at the Reins of Life therapeutic farm in Landenberg, Pa. maintenance. Grooming and socialization with the animals as part of the Reins of Life experience for many of its clients.



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LANDENBERG, Pa.

When Lauren Bryant first looked into signing up her six-year-old daughter Leah for equine therapy, the best she could manage was a two-year wait list for a place outside West Chester, Pa.

The young mom and West Grove resident was despondent. The sooner she managed to get her young daughter into a program, the sooner she could begin to reap the benefits – improving the motor skills, speech, and occupational skills that can be challenging for a child with Down Syndrome.

An email from the Down Syndrome Association of Delaware alerted her to Reins of Life, tucked deep away in the sweeping hills and valleys of Landenberg, Pa., just west of Hockessin.

“I said, let me call and see what their wait is,” Bryant said. “She started within two weeks.”

Since then, Bryant said the therapy has vastly helped her daughter in grand and unexpected ways.

“Just this past year they were commenting how much better her posture is,” she said. “When I mentioned she’d been therapeutic riding, they said, ‘well that makes perfect sense.’”

### **VOLUNTEER BEGINNINGS**

The nonprofit Reins of Life is the creation of Judy Hendrickson, a former sales and marketing manager who felt there was a deeper purpose awaiting her.

Back in 1990, Hendrickson volunteered at a farm working with animals and special needs children in a form of therapy that brought the two together.

The transformations she saw there, Hendrickson said, gave her an epiphany that has deeply affected her life ever since.

“It just resonated with me, I just got it,” Hendrickson said of the work. “It was the direction I was meant to move towards. For me, there was nothing else – and it’s been 22 years, so I know it’s real.”

As she started looking into how to create her own equine therapy program, Hendrickson encountered a number on individuals who were in the unique position to help her put the operation together – including former Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode.

“It was serendipity,” Hendrickson said. “When you are passionate about something and have a real true commitment, love, and desire, the universe aligns on that. That’s the way things come together.”

### **CHANGING LIVES**

Hendrickson said she was moved to enter the world of equine therapy when she saw the incredible effects even single sessions can have on a child.

While animals have long been used for therapeutic reasons, Hendrickson said that equine therapy is considered particularly effective for the range of disabilities the therapy is recommended for.

“Everything from physical ailments like cerebral palsy, to things like ADHD, children on t

- **Page 2 of 3** - Children can experience physical changes, such as improvement in muscle tone, balance, coordination and even speech and socialization – all through riding and guided interaction with the horses, Hendrickson said.

Allison Rafferty, of Lincoln University, Pa., said that the transformations seen in her six-year-old son Austin (who has a form of cerebral palsy called spastic quadriplegia) were profound – to the point that he is sometimes able to walk unassisted by a walker.

Having been clients at Reins for Life for the past four years, Rafferty said that everyone in Austin's circle – teachers, therapists and family members – have seen the noticeable changes in him.

"Horses mimic a human gait as they walk, so as the horse walks it provides core strength for Austin's abdominal muscles," she said.

Riding over the years, she added, has enabled him to sit up straighter than before, giving him more control over his neck and other muscles.

She added that the movement of the horse also helps to loosen Austin's muscles, which are much stiffer than usual as a result of his condition, by forcing his core to work overtime.

"This place is a wonderful asset to the community," Rafferty said of the Reins organization. "There are very few places like this for special needs children in Southern Chester County. I consider this another extracurricular, just like I would for my other kids."

## **VOLUNTEER DRIVEN**

Much of the work at Reins of Life is accomplished by a network of volunteers, ranging from high school students with horse experience, to retired folks like Ruthann Vagamov, who Hendrickson referred to as an "old-school cowgirl."

A former Hewlett-Packard worker, Vagamov started at Reins last year in an effort to do something that made her feel useful.

In that time, the 72-year-old Vagamov said she's met and bonded with kids like Austin, whose experiences she said have touched her in unexpected ways.

"It makes me feel good beyond words," she said. "I'll be doing this as long as I can."

"That's the thing about volunteer work – you have no idea what direction it may take your life," Hendrickson said. "We're enhancing the lives of the people who volunteer by giving them a job and something to feel good about doing."

The animals themselves also benefit, often coming from professional show or racing backgrounds that leave them ready for a life of relative leisure and loving attention.

"Now they can relax, be just a horse, and help a person experience something they may never have accomplished," she said.

- **Page 3 of 3** - "The sad thing is, more people need to know about it," Bryant said of the organization. "It's really changed our lives like you wouldn't believe."

Reins of Life is located at 113 Crestwood Road, Landenberg. For more information, visit [reinsoflife.com](http://reinsoflife.com) or call (610) 274-3300.

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