



Kids & Horses Foundation
by Amy Harris

The closest some kids get to horses is over a fence on the side of some country road, if they're able to convince their parents to pull over. But what about those horse crazy kids whose parents perhaps can't afford a car – who struggle just to put food on the table? It doesn't take being raised on the show circuit to develop a love of horses; loving horses is in the blood. And even though parents want to give their kids all they can, for many a pony or even riding lessons just isn't in the cards.

Aside from the annual visit to the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair with school, and whatever they can glean from magazines and television, exposure to horses for underprivileged kids ends there.

The Kids & Horses Foundation is seeking to change all this. Established in September 2005, the Kids & Horses Foundation has so far made it possible for 60 underprivileged kids from Ontario's Peel Region to spend quality time with horses, through educational riding camps and lessons.

Gina O'Sullivan, one of four volunteer directors for the non-profit foundation, pointed out that there are many programs for physically and mentally disabled children and even so called 'at risk' youth, but that, until now, no means existed for the underprivileged to experience riding and horsemanship.

Just as working with horses promotes pride and self-confidence in disabled and troubled youngsters, it can provide life skills which can lead to employment opportunities for disadvantaged, yet passionate horse lovers. Children between the ages of 10 and 18 are referred to Kids & Horses through social agencies in the area and are screened by program directors to determine whether they are suitable candidates.

"There are some kids who think it would be fun to ride a horse, but then there are others who are just obsessed," said O'Sullivan. Kids & Horses founder and president Robin Ogilvie said, "We are seeing obvious evidence that learning good horsemanship provides long-term life benefits for these children. These benefits include learning discipline, building self-confidence, patience, respect and trust."

O'Sullivan added, "We are not only looking at this program as a way for kids to spend time with horses, we are looking at it as potential vocational training for those truly committed individuals – the trainers in progress."

To that end, the foundation has established the Kids & Horses Scholarship, which will be awarded annually to a graduate of the program who wishes to pursue college-level studies leading to a career in the horse industry. The first recipient is now enrolled in a veterinary technician program. Kids & Horses received a start-up grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and relies on the generosity of donors to fund the program, as well as to numerous fundraisers. In addition, the foundation has applied for charitable status.

"Between private and corporate contributions, we have enjoyed the support of approximately 175 donors in our first year," said O'Sullivan, "from a child donating a dollar, to individuals donating hundreds or even thousands of dollars."

While the Caledon, Ontario-based Kids & Horses Foundation would love to help every child in need, and expand to cover all of Ontario, O'Sullivan said, "We don't want to get too big too fast. We have to make sure we can sustain the children already in the program. "Of the 60 children in the program this past year, there are several who have shown strong desire and aptitude to continue and we will do all we can to be sure that happens."

For more information about the Kids & Horses Foundation, or to make a donation, call 905 880-8711 or email info@kidsandhorses.ca

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