

Winslow launches horse and carriage program for patients in wheelchairs

Warwick - Winslow Therapeutic Center, a not-for-profit hippotherapy and therapeutic riding center, has just introduced an exciting new program.

Until now, no matter what his or her disability, the patient had to be able to sit on the horse, even if that sometimes required continuous assistance.

Enter Winslow volunteers Fred and Mary Ann Klepper. They are the founders of the Alison Klepper Memorial Fund, established in memory of their daughter, a Winslow volunteer who died in an automobile accident four years ago. The Memorial Fund in their daughter's name was created to help provide scholarships for children in need of Therapeutic Riding who would otherwise not be able to afford this type of service.



Volunteer Pam McAssey, left, acting as a patient seated in a wheelchair, and Mary Ann Klepper holding the actual reins, enjoy a spin in a cart pulled by "Pepperfection."

Fred Klepper, a Warwick resident who owns an Allstate Insurance agency in Montvale, N.J., loves riding horses and, for the past 12 years, he has also become an expert at driving horse drawn vehicles. As a volunteer, he came to realize that Winslow could use a horse and carriage program for special needs people who are unable to ride on horseback.



A training session begins with Fred and Mary Ann Klepper, assisted by John McAssey (rear) harnessing Pepperfection.

"Even if they can't ride a horse," said Klepper, "by sitting in a cart or carriage, they can still benefit from the motion of the horse."

He recently decided to become certified as a horse and carriage-driving instructor for the disabled and traveled, at his own expense, to the Austin Horse Park, Weirsdale, Fla., the site of a certification program conducted by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association.

"I have studied for several insurance licenses," said Klepper, "but this carriage-driving instructor course for the handicapped was the toughest course I've ever experienced."

Klepper learned to offer students with physical, mental, sensory, or emotional conditions the

rewards of interaction and control of a horse or pony while driving from a carriage seat or in their own wheelchair. He also had to certify in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and First Aid.

“Using a horse and carriage,” he explained, “gives participants an alternative or an addition to riding, opening up the world of horses to those who may be unable to ride due to weight, balance, fatigue, fear of heights, the inability to sit astride, or other issues.”

All achievements are applauded but some disabled drivers go on to mainstream carriage driving competitions, such as pleasure driving and combined driving events, where they compete on an equal footing with the able bodied. Drivers in wheelchairs are often seen at these competitions.

Winslow purchased a hand-crafted two-wheel horse cart with a built in ramp and wheel chair safety bar, thanks to a grant from state Sen. Thomas Morahan, R-C-New City. Winslow has its own lift platform to transfer wheelchair patients but the built-in ramp in the cart can also be used for loading a wheelchair at other locations or for an emergency egress.

“The horse is the most important member of our team,” said Klepper who explained that some horses are more suited for pulling carriages than riding. But they must be trained to back up, make tight turns and follow voice commands as well as a touch of the whip which, contrary to its name, is merely used to gently signal a command by touching the horse to produce the same results as a rider’s hand, body and leg signals in the saddle.



With Mary Ann Klepper holding the reins, volunteer John McAssey and certified instructor Fred Klepper loads volunteer Pam McAssey, acting as a patient and seated in a wheelchair, from Winslow’s loading platform to the cart.



Flora Lee Condello holds “Pepperfection” for volunteer Pam McAssey, left, and Mary Ann Klepper.

Patients initially learn to feel the movement and the response of the horse with dual non-operational reins while a qualified driver does the actual driving. Advanced students can eventually progress to handling the actual reins and even driving the vehicle solo.

It takes three to five volunteers besides the instructor for one session. Duties might include helping to load the patient and wheelchair, holding the horse or, if qualified,

driving the cart with the patient alongside, all under the supervision of a certified instructor.

"We're looking for more volunteers," said Klepper.



and carriage driving program or other services

Certified Instructor Fred Klepper demonstrates the use of the cart's self-contained ramp to load or unload patients. (Photos by Roger Gavan)