

Frances Allen's Desert Roundup – Pegasus Riding Academy Holds Easter Brunch



Pictured: Pegasus Riding Academy for the Handicapped hosted its annual Easter Sunday brunch/fundraiser. On hand for the event were (from left): Chase Berke, Pegasus program director; Peter Soloman, co-host of the brunch; and Lori Sarnier, Pegasus founder/president. Photo by Sherman Fridman

Pegasus Riding Academy for the Handicapped is an organization that doesn't horse around with black tie galas ... its two primary constituent groups—horses and their riders—would not be impressed. After all, at Pegasus they see miracles happen every day.

However, they do have an 18-year-old tradition of gathering for an Easter Sunday Brunch and fundraiser which is the closest thing to an Easter Parade you can find in the Desert. It's not only colorful, it's informative.

For more than 25 years, the academy has provided a place where children and adults of all ages, with every type of disability, can come for full body range-of-motion exercise on horseback, —hence its name: "Equine Therapy." The walking motion of the horse's body against human legs, massages all the muscles used in human-walking and is an inspiring and exciting experience for these whose life is spent in a wheelchair or with disabilities.

For physically impaired riders, riding—along with mounting and dismounting a horse—helps prevent atrophy from affecting those still good muscles the rider has.

Mentally challenged ones also benefit emotionally and psychologically from Pegasus' programs by learning how to concentrate and follow directions along with the sense of accomplishment from being able to steer a large horse.

Autistics, which make up about 50 percent of Pegasus' riders, often have difficulty bonding with people, a short attention span and problems communicating. In the riding ring, autistics are able to bond with an animal, developing trust and confidence. Once in the riding ring, many autistics suddenly become attentive and some have found ways to communicate ... not a bad little miracle.

Riders come from public sources in the Coachella Valley, such school districts, non-profits like Angel View Crippled Children Foundation, the Palm Springs Stroke Recovery Center, as well as private referrals from physicians and physical therapists. Age is no barrier as Pegasus' "youngest" rider is 3, while the oldest are in their 80s. No one is turned away because of the severity of his or her disability as all riders at Pegasus make some progress ... little miracles all.

Pegasus Riding Academy for the Handicapped was founded more than 25 years ago by local philanthropist and horsewoman Lori Sarner who, while dividing her time between Palm Springs and London, (where she was the only American woman permitted to ride the Queen's horses), spearheaded a volunteer-based organization where the needs of the riders and horses are paramount. It is because of her drive and personality she was able to bring together a largely volunteer staff to run the organization to which she still devotes her time and expertise as president.

The force of Sarner's personality enticed former television executive Robin Montgomery to serve as executive director of Pegasus and transformed Chase Berke, and award-winning graphic designer who had never touched a horse before joining Pegasus as a volunteer about 10 years ago, into the organization's program manager.

There are now more than 100 registered volunteers. All Pegasus volunteers receive special training for their work and are required to have the patience and sensitivity that their jobs demand.

Of course, Pegasus would not have achieved its current level of success without its horses. Each of its equines has been trained to accept riders who might scream, cry, kick, throw their helmets, have tantrums in the saddle and ride with respirators humming.

Every week, from October to May, these horses carry riders through a series of exercise, routines and challenges designed to improve the riders' well being and self-esteem—all the while having fun. It's work that requires constant training as well as gentleness and extraordinary patience on the part of the horse.

Learn more about this remarkable organization by visiting: www.pegasusridingacademy.org.