



A young rider demonstrates the adaptable saddle on Geoffrey at Military Family Day at Smithfield Farm.

A Sweet Saddle Story

By Mary Grauerholz

Janice Foster, the owner of Smithfield Farm in Hatchville, watches bright-eyed Emily sit atop Geoffrey, a gentle giant of a horse. The happy 8-year-old, who is nonverbal and paraplegic, is one of many children and adults who now have the opportunity to be equestrians, thanks to an adaptable saddle donated by The TGC Fund of The Cape Cod Foundation last Fall.

Watching Emily and others who are physically, mentally, or emotionally challenged become equestrians is the culmination of Foster's life's work. "This is why we're here," she says. "Riding gives them a feeling of empowerment, a sense of 'I'm differently abled, not disabled,'" Foster says.

The farm, tucked off Sandwich Road, boards dozens of horses and teaches riding lessons, but some of its most exciting work revolves around a horse with a sixth sense. Head trainer Amanda Wass, who is certified by PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International) has trained Geoffrey to stay focused and calm as riders are transported to him on a wheelchair-accessible ramp (donated by the Cape Cod 4-H Club), then placed on his back. (HINT: A mechanical hoist to assist clients is next on Foster's wish list.)

Riders come from several organizations: the federal Department of Defense (DoD), Cape Cod 4-H Club, the VNA Hospice Program and Military Family Outreach Cape Cod, among others. Some youngsters have recently lost a parent or have parents in war zones. Some adults, coming from military service, are dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. Other adults have brain injuries or are in recovery from substance abuse.

Kerry J. Bickford, Extension Educator for 4-H Afterschool & Youth Development and Military Family Outreach Cape Cod, says the adaptable saddle has made the military riding program more accessible. "I think independence is a huge issue for anyone coping with a disability," she says. "The ability to become more active participants and gain the confidence that is often lost when coping with a physical challenge is priceless."

The donor-advised fund was opened seven years ago after a successful fundraiser, TGC for the Troops, a tournament held at the member-owned TGC Sacconnesset golf course in Falmouth. The fund provides assistance to Cape-area veterans and their families.

"There is growing evidence that equine therapy shows great promise in treating veterans and their families who suffer from anxiety, depression, anger, irritability, and other debilitating effects of deployments and post-traumatic stress," says Gwen Errhalt, TGC Membership Manager. "The TGC Fund is happy to help Smithfield."

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