

Sheryl Soukup of Naples Equestrian Challenge is in the business of changing lives

By: Kelly Merritt

Sheryl Soukup is the Executive Director of Naples Equestrian Challenge. For those who don't know her, it might seem surprising to find this former scientist on a working farm. Before she made the leap to social services, Soukup was up to her elbows in science, microbiological research to be exact where she put her degree in microbiology from University of Massachusetts to good use.

But those who do know this inspiring mother of three are not at all surprised that for the past thirteen years, Soukup has served in many nonprofit leadership roles. Although she has only been with Naples Equestrian Challenge for about a year, her presence is a key component to the organization's current success.

The Naples Equestrian Challenge provides therapeutic riding for Collier County, Florida adults and children with disabilities. The headquarters are located at 206 Ridge Drive just north of Pine Ridge Road, a rarity for a program like this which would otherwise be located on the outskirts of town where land is plentiful. Soukup knows how lucky the organization is to have so many generous supporters who make such an important organization possible.

"We have 250 active volunteers and estimate that we'll have 20,000 volunteer hours by the end of the year," said Soukup. "I can't say enough about these incredible volunteers – we have just four full-time people and three part-time people – and to ensure the children are safe, one person leads a horse and one person monitors each side, and our volunteers love the horses."

Each horse has a volunteer with whom they've developed a relationship. That person cares for that horse – creating a special bond that further



encourages the horses' docile manner and readies them for working with the special children and adults in the therapeutic riding program.

The horses are a very special part of life at Naples Equestrian Challenge. Buddy, Ted, Dottie, Dyno, Garth, Kokomo Joe, Kid, Amber, Nick and Pick a Spot all have their own stories which are listed online at NaplesEquestrianChallenge.org. Also recognized are the horses who have served before these gentle giants. They are the silent heroes of the farm and have been known to steal just as many hearts as the children do.

"We can't just take any horse as they must have a special temperament, be tolerant, gentle and can't be at end of their life span as they have to be ready to work when asked to," says Soukup. "The gait of the horse simu-

lates the way the human body moves and it's very similar to the feeling that one gets or the movement one experiences when they are up on a horse."

Riding a horse helps the disabled person by moving their body in ways that the non-disabled body moves.

"We had one boy here who his hip was out of the socket which is very painful, and hip surgery is very painful and it's a very grueling recovery," says Soukup. "Her son's hip went back in the socket after spending time week after week on the horse and to know that we could prevent a child from having to go through something that extreme makes it worth it."

Soukup is a very special mom to daughter Eva, who has special needs. That's how she got involved with non-profit work. She began as a volunteer in Boston volunteering with her daughter's early intervention program to help other parents learn how to help their own children, planning family support activities and learning how to take care of a child with disabilities.

"When you have a baby and that child is born with special needs, it takes a lot of learning and research and you have to learn how to ask for help and reach out to people," she says, her eyes full of pride for her beautiful daughter.

Soukup's background in science has transferred nicely to Naples Equestrian Challenge where she endeavors to measure progress, evaluate data, make changes and tweak everything to make for the best possible program. But being able to say she walked a mile in the shoes of a mom with a child with special needs is equally important.

"My heart is in this, coming here and having this opportunity to work with

kids with disabilities because being able to help kids like my own child, means the world to me," she says. "I wish she could have benefitted by a program like this – but she has a rod in her back so she is not able to ride."

Although Soukup's daughter Eva is not a candidate for therapeutic riding, Soukup understands that for kids, they think they are coming to Naples Equestrian Challenge for their special activity, not therapy. So far this year with Soukup at the helm, the organization has served 415 kids up from last year's total of 235 children, evidence that Naples Equestrian Challenge is growing.

"We also have 25 new riders, so we know we are adding more classes – in fact we are almost at capacity and are looking for opportunities to expand as we balance fundraising with growth," she says. "As we serve more kids our expenses increase and we have to raise money to a lot for those expenses. Our barn only has ten stalls and they are all full, so we need to look at building another barn or find a way to house the horses."

Soukup and all of the volunteers are grateful for the support they've received from all of their donors especially the Naples Children and Education Foundation which has helped fund the organization's growth. It is also a United Way Agency. Most of the cost of riding is subsidized and no one is turned away for inability to pay.

The next fundraiser is the sixth annual Bootstrap Boogie Barn Dance on November 12th, with music, food, square dancing, tours of the barn, pony pie bingo and a mechanical bull under the riding arena. For more information call 239.596.2988 or visit NaplesEquestrianChallenge.org.



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