



Riding for the Disabled Assoc (NSW) Illawarra Centre



Mecenzi was born four weeks early and suffers from the most severe form of cerebral palsy. She was given a very guarded prognosis: she would never walk or talk & would always suffer tremors & convulsions and struggle to eat. Mecenzi is unable to take part in sports and activities that her classmates enjoy, such as netball, hockey, dancing or even a simple game of tag. RDA offers a sport and therapeutic activity that not only can Mecenzi take part in, but one that many able-bodied people find challenging. Mecenzi is your everyday kid, and that's all she wants to be. But when we think back to her diagnosis, she is one little miracle! Every time someone said she would "never" do something, she did it in one way or another. With her determination, I believe there is a good chance that one day she will walk with minimal support.

Toni, Mecenzi's mother

Background

Riding for the Disabled Assoc (NSW) Illawarra Centre is a not for profit organisation managed and run entirely by volunteers and has been in operation since November 1981, delivering over 25 years of experience. The Centre provides adults and children with disabilities from the community, the chance to learn the sport of horse riding which has numerous therapeutic benefits, in a safe controlled environment. The Coaches that manage the Centre have all completed two years of training in safety, horse management and teaching horse riding skills, before being accredited by Riding for the Disabled Association NSW. Coaches must regularly attend coaching clinics and workshops to keep their accreditation and the Centre has to go through re-accreditation every couple of years. The Centre services an area from the Sutherland Shire to Berry and west to Wilton and has over 40 riders a week, the majority of these being children.

The Riders

The riders may range from 2 years of age to 80. RDA is one of the few organisations that offer a multi-diagnostic service, catering for people with a wide range of disabilities. These disabilities include intellectual disabilities, specific learning disorders, injuries resulting from accidents, cerebral palsy, psychiatric disorders, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, thalidomide, visual and hearing impairments, autism and amputees.

What RDA Achieves and Benefits

Horse riding is a unique form of exercise and rehabilitation. The complex movement of the horse helps to improve coordination, balance, muscular development and fitness. Horse riding and horse related activities assist greatly and often dramatically in the development and restoration of personal confidence, self esteem, communication skills, increased learning and trust. For people with challenging behaviour horses offer a powerful medium for restoring a sense of personal control, which significantly improves their behaviour towards family, teachers and friends.

It can be difficult for some families to socialise and form good friendships with families of children that do not have disabilities, as their child's needs may be quite demanding. Parents and siblings that attend the Centre develop bonds and friendships with the other families. This has a great impact on improving their lives and lessening the stress on the families.

Volunteers

The centre's volunteer program offers a number of opportunities for the community to get involved and presently has approximately 40 volunteers. Many of these volunteers are the local youth and the riders parents, who groom and prepare the horses for classes and assist as side walkers and leaders to the riders. The young volunteers learn a wide range of valuable skills that they can put in to practice in everyday life. They learn all about horse riding and animal care, responsibility, safety and discipline. They gain skills in interpersonal communication and teamwork. Working with the riders also bestows in them good values, such as; helping others, empathy, compassion, patience and understanding for people with disabilities.

As the Centre is non-government funded and therefore relies heavily on the generosity of individuals, community groups and local businesses to be able to continue to offer its valuable service.