

Therapeutic Equestrian Society helps boost youngster's confidence

VANCOUVER | Teen now able to ride alone

BY CINDY ARMSTRONG

From a very young age, my son Robbie Armstrong loved horses and was busy collecting stuffed horses, horse books and stickers, and always asking Santa for a horse calendar — rather intriguing for a child born and raised in the city.

Robbie's dreams of one day riding a horse, however, were uncertain. He was born with Prader-Willi syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that results in physical and developmental disabilities. He is 15 years old and is small for his age, with low muscle tone, making it difficult to participate in typical sports.

Three years ago, when friends from our special-needs community told us about the riding program at the Richmond Therapeutic Equestrian Society, we moved quickly to get him enrolled.

There was a lengthy waiting list and he had to wait patiently for a spot to open. Finally, after a few months, we got the call that he could start the program. Robbie has not looked back since starting his equestrian passion. Early in the program, the focus was to get him comfortable



Organization: Richmond Therapeutic Equestrian Society, a non-profit organization that provides therapeutic benefits of horseback riding to children and youth with disabilities.

approaching the horse, something I even find intimidating.

Then Robbie would learn to sit on the horse with a leader and two walkers and, slowly, learn how to walk the horse around the arena. The progression from gaining familiarity with the routines, to learning simple games while on horseback, to increasing his strength and flexibility, and then increasing his horsemanship skills, has been wonderful to watch for me as a mother.

As a parent of a child who has benefited so greatly from the program, I can't speak highly enough of this wonderful organization. Robbie can now ride unassisted with

a leader and can do a rising trot holding only his reins — an amazing accomplishment for someone with Prader-Willi syndrome. The staff at RTES work very hard to provide a wonderful and safe environment for all the participants. The benefits that we have seen with Robbie since participating include significantly improved core body strength, better balance and coordination, and an increased confidence in his equestrian skills.

Another wonderful benefit to Robbie, and all children involved at RTES, is the incredible sense of pride and accomplishment. The program allows our children to participate in an activity they are proud to share with family and friends.

RTES is a wonderful organization committed to providing a quality therapeutic riding program to children who benefit so much from the experience.

RTES relies on support from the community and tru-



Robbie Armstrong feeds carrots to Victor the horse .

ly appreciates the funding received by The Vancouver Sun Children's Fund.

Cindy Armstrong is a board member for the Richmond Therapeutic Equestrian Society and a parent of a participant.

Children with special needs benefit year-round from 100 per cent of every dollar given to the Vancouver Sun Children's Fund.

Donations may be made with the accompanying coupon, or by calling (604) 605-2426.