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Equestrian program helps girl escape shackles of autism

By *Bonnie Burch*
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Following the calls of trainer Lynne Evans, 15-year-old Grace Gregory of Brentwood expertly leads her horse, Opie, to pivot, trot and dance over the sanded floor of the Saddle Springs Equine Center.

Watching this practice run in preparation for this weekend's Lendon Gray Dressage Festival in Saugerties, N.Y., it's hard to imagine that this is the same shy little girl who eight years was introduced to the Saddle Up! therapeutic horseback riding program for children with disabilities.

Back then she barely said a word, nor would she look anyone in the eyes.

Her work in the dressage equestrian discipline in general and through the Saddle Up! program in particular has helped Grace blossom into a self-assured teen despite still dealing with the challenges of autism.

"Dressage is really hard because you have to spend a long time training to learn it. But Saddle Up! gave me lots of tips and techniques to make me a better rider," Grace said.

Sometimes when she considers how far her daughter has come, Grace's mom, Susan Gregory, admits her eyes fill with happy tears. Grace's parents — including her dad, Barry Gregory — heard about Saddle Up! through the family of a boy who has Down syndrome. Susan Gregory said she had been interested in horses herself all her life and was eager to give Grace the experience she never had.

"The first day out there, she was assigned to this little, old pony. Well, she just went right up to him. She was never afraid or intimidated. At that moment, we knew this was the right place for her," mom said.

Evans, founder of Saddle Up!, also recognized Grace's extraordinary talents in the saddle.

"From the beginning, I could see that Grace had a natural ability and then some. I thought, 'Wow, this girl can ride!' "

A member of the Middle Tennessee Pony Club, Grace was judged the high-point winner in musical freestyle at a regional competition at the Kentucky Horse Park last month.

"I couldn't believe it. I thought they were joking when they told me," Grace said of her win as an accomplished rider.

Horse was a gift

For the past two years, Grace has had her own horse, a gentle brown and white paint horse named Opie, a gift from fellow local horse lover Sarah Ingram. Horse and rider are almost inseparable.

"If Opie was small enough, he would be sleeping in our house. He's like our third child. He's just great, beautiful and so sweet," Grace's mom said.

Not only has Grace advanced in competitive horseback riding sports, but her natural bond with horses has also opened her world to new experiences.

Now, she has a part-time job as a groom once a week at Saddle Springs, an equine-centered community in south Williamson County. Drea Gunness, general manager at Saddle Springs, told her friend Lendon Gray, a former U.S. dressage Olympian, about Grace's superior horsemanship ability. In return, Gray extended a special invitation for Grace to attend the equestrian competition and educational event with her entry fees covered.

Opie won't make the trip. A bout with arthritis will keep the horse here while Grace settles onto the back of a borrowed horse while in New York.

But it would still cost more than Grace's family could afford for the travel, food and lodging, not to mention the price of show tack and proper attire. Saddle Springs' new owners, Teresa Hartsaw and Andre Hartsaw-Jaeckle, agreed to cover that cost for Grace and her mother.

"They really have a lot of compassion for kids and horses. They are primarily involved in the hunter/jumper discipline but want to be a part of the equine community in all disciplines," Gunness said.

Rider is mentor

Grace hopes to continue at Saddle Up! At age 13, she graduated into the program's Pony Pals level, where she volunteers in the barn, caring for the horses and keeping them conditioned. Last year, she received the volunteer of the year award.

This year, she's got a new job as a mentor to a couple of Saddle Up! students. She'll take these newcomers under her wing and show them the ropes of horseback riding.

And now she has her sights set on even bigger equestrian events. She would like to take her talents all the way to the Olympics someday.

"God has a plan for Grace. Every special-needs child has gifts in areas where they can excel," her proud mother said. "It just takes something like this to realize that all special-needs children are true blessings to other people."
