

Bringing the horse to the child

Hinchinbrook Farm introduces Horse Boy Method to Nova Scotia

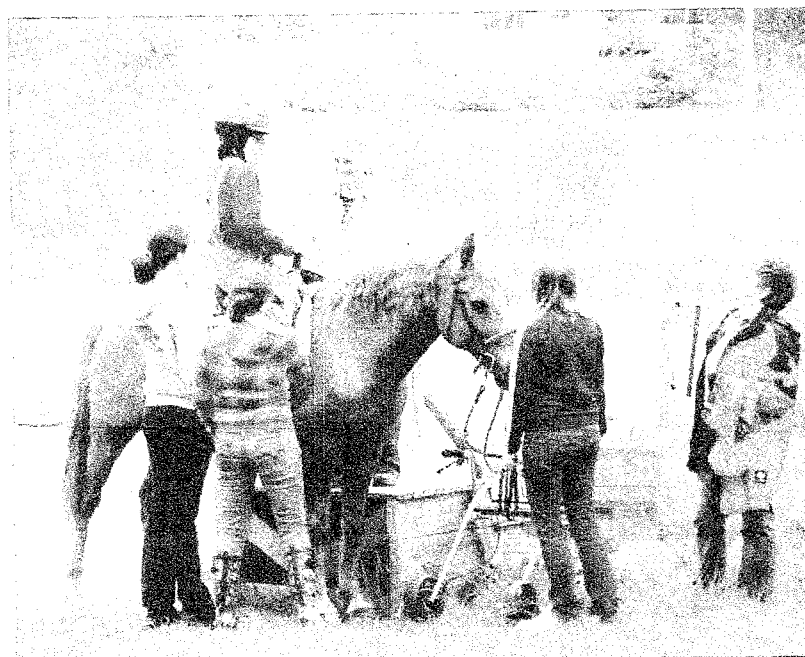
by Judith Scrimger

When Patricia McGill, a Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association (CanTRA) certified instructor retired, she moved from Quebec to Blockhouse, Nova Scotia, with her two therapy horses. Within two weeks of settling into Hinchinbrook Farm in 2006, she received a call from a parent who had heard about her professional work with special needs children at Lucky Harvest Centre in Quebec.

"I told them I was retired but to bring the child over to see the horses. It was immediately clear that there was a connection between the horse and child so I told them I'd help them out until we could find them a Therapeutic Riding (TR) program," says McGill. She soon learned that there were long waiting lists for the existing TR centres in Nova Scotia and before too long, the Hinchinbrook Farm Society was established. Like other CanTRA programs, this not-for-profit has a volunteer board of directors and a large



Claire McNally of Bridgewater, N.S., takes Dandy for a ride on the trail at Hinchinbrook Farm. McNally has been participating in therapeutic riding for four years and despite having little use of her left side, she trots and canters independently. Her enthusiasm, skill, and courage are an inspiration to all who watch her ride. (Judith Scrimger photo)



Therapeutic riding instructor Patricia McGill (facing camera) helps Crystal McKean, 27, of Pinehurst, to mount Dandy. McKean's motto is "you can do anything, almost." Her advice to others with disabilities is to give riding a try. (Judith Scrimger photo)

contingent of parents and community members who have worked since 2007 to renovate the barn, install wheelchair ramps, and build riding paddocks and trails that are suitable for riders with physical therapy and special education needs. Hinchinbrook has become a lively community, supporting families with 20 regular riding clients, respite programs, activities for First Step Early Intervention Programs, and summer camps.

In addition to running a CanTRA centre, Hinchinbrook also offers programs for clients with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) using the Horse Boy Method developed by Rupert Isaacson of Elgin, Texas.

ASD is a range of complex neurodevelopmental disorders, characterized by social impairments, communications difficulties, and restrictive, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior. Each person exhibits individual behaviors and thus requires very specialized

programs. ASD kids often respond well to animals, especially horses.

"I first learned about Horse Boy from a parent who gave me a copy of *Rupert's book. I ate it up,*" says McGill. She tracked him down in Texas to order more copies and arranged for the film, *Horse Boy*, to be shown in Nova Scotia. They struck up a relationship.

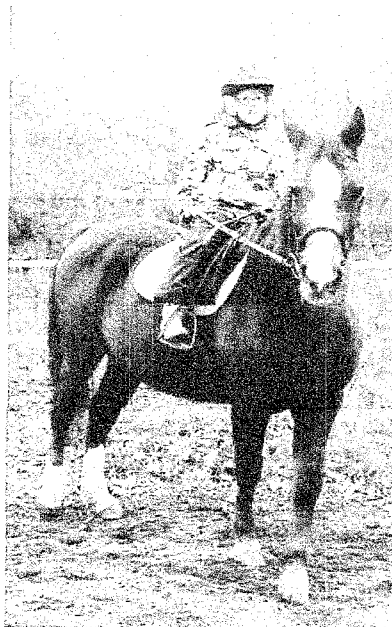
"I was already using similar methods with ASD clients and wanted to learn more." Isaacson has already visited the farm once and will conduct a training workshop this summer at Canada's first Canadian Horse Boy Camp™ for autistic families.

Kirkland Gates, 14, has been riding at Hinchinbrook for nearly three years. "Kirkland, who is non-verbal ASD, loves to be in the woods on the trail," says his volunteer side walker, Jeanette Poirier. "ASD kids often suffer from sensory overload, and being out in nature has a very calming effect on Kirkland." A mounting block has been built near the brook that runs by the trail so that Gates can pause his ride to play in the water and listen to the sounds of the small waterfall.

"Horse Boy doesn't work for everyone, but when it does work, it works like a charm," says McGill. Isaacson developed the program with his own son Rowan and subsequently found the techniques worked well with other children with ASD. The program is centred not on teaching riding, but on developing communication skills through sensory work with horses.

There are many examples of children with ASD who are non-verbal, whose first words have been the horse's name. "I recall one child who would grunt and yell and the parents had no reason to believe that any language had been acquired," says McGill. "When the child was on the horse, I told him that if he wanted the horse to go, he had to tell him to 'move on.' The parent called out from the side of the paddock, 'he doesn't speak.' Then the child said, 'move on.'"

Gates' mother, Ginnie, has nothing but praise for Hinchinbrook and McGill. "She is so excellent with special needs children. Kirkland gets more out



Lily Churchill, 8, rides regularly in the Horse Boy After School program for families challenged by Autism Spectrum Disorder. Lily's transition to school was much better this year thanks to her friendship with the therapy horses at Hinchinbrook Farm.
(Photo courtesy of Hinchinbrook Farm)

of that hour than he does all week at school. He gets a one-on-one experience that is tailored to him and Patty is so good at figuring out ways to engage him."

Hinchinbrook follows the Horse Boy motto of bringing the horse to the child. A group of volunteers are building an Autism-friendly paddock that provides space for the horses to graze as well as a trampoline for the children to burn off excess energy. Painting and other creative activities can take place in the reassuring presence of the horses.

McGill's therapy horses, Dandy and Silver Bell are both registered Morgans. "Morgans were bred to be all-round horses. If there is one breed that's suitable for therapy, it's the Morgan," says McGill.

One just has to watch Dandy, 15, at work to agree with McGill. He has all the energy, spirit, and forward movement of the Morgan breed and has been trained by McGill to do a variety of tasks. He has learned that when Gates bangs on his sides or starts shouting that it's nothing to worry about. In the next lesson, 15-year-old Claire McNally,



Kirkland Gates, 14, rides a Morgan gelding, Dandy, through the woods trail at Hinchinbrook Farm. Hinchinbrook specializes in therapeutic riding for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Being with the horses and in nature has a calming effect on Kirkland. His mother, Ginnie, says the horses have made a world of difference to her son.
(Photo courtesy of Hinchinbrook Farm)

who has little use of her left side of her body because of a severe stroke, can give him the lightest of cues and he moves forward into a balanced trot or canter as required. He walks along quietly as the side walkers throw a soccer ball for McNally to catch. In the summer, the soccer ball is replaced with a ball filled with water. "On a warm day it's very refreshing for both horse and rider to get soaked," says McGill. Dandy stands quietly as Crystal McKean, who has cerebral palsy, transfers colored rings that are looped on his ears to a stand balanced on his rump. Of course, McGill has spent hours training Dandy and schools him every day so that he responds automatically to the aids. "All horses would benefit from TR training because it's a way to create a 'thinking' horse. People too often forget it's a partnership between you and your horse."

Since working with the Horse Boy Method, McGill has been teaching Dandy and his stable mates Silver Bell and a miniature horse, Buddy, to do tricks. All of the clients enjoy seeing the horses respond to their simple verbal commands, but it's especially helpful with non-verbal children in encourag-

ing them to use words to communicate their needs and desires.

McNally, of Bridgewater, has been riding for four years. Despite having little use of her left side, she walks, trots, and canters independently. She neck reins Dandy using her right hand. "I've had to learn to control my energy. I get stressed easily and I have had to learn to slow down and relax. The horse is teaching me that -- once when I was over-excited, I asked Dandy to trot and he cantered." McNally also loves coming to summer camp. Hinchinbrook has begun a program where five and six-year-olds come two mornings a week and the older riders with disabilities are their mentors. It gives the children with disabilities an opportunity to take on a leadership role and teach other kids how to groom and care for a horse.

Crystal McKean, 27, of Pinhurst, has been riding for about two years. Her motto is: "you can do anything, almost." Her advice to others with disabilities is to give riding a try. "Never give up. If something is tough, stick with it." McKean often spends respite weekends at the farm where McGill puts her to work. "I don't mind working," she says. "I love it here."

With the large mature maples shading the riding paddock and the welcome from the therapy Newfoundland dog, Kelly, the peaceful yet joyous atmosphere at Hinchinbrook is immediately apparent. Ginnie describes it this way: "It's wonderful to go somewhere with Kirkland that he isn't being judged and where it's soothing for me, too."

The only unhappy note is the fact that there is little financial support in Nova Scotia for TR programs like Hinchinbrook. "Half of our clients have ASD and I'm getting more phone calls every day. There has to be funding somewhere for this kind of therapy so it's not a financial hardship for parents or for me," says McGill. 