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Narrative sheds light on healing power of horses

Sarah Peecher Nov 28, 2019

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Betty Weibel of Chagrin Falls, left, and Debbie Gadus, right, a Chardon native, show off one of Fieldstone Farm Therap Riding Center's oldest therapy horses, Mitch. Ms. Gadus said Mitch and the other horses at the Bainbridge farm live in moment, which helps those attending equine therapy classes learn to do the same.

Geoff Powers

Betty Weibel of Chagrin Falls began volunteering at Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center in the 1990s. Years later, she has written a book centered on a local woman's inspirational story linked to the help of therapeutic riding.

Mrs. Weibel said she had heard of Debbie Gadus, a Chardon native, through serving on the Board of Trustees at Fieldstone Farm. The pair met for the first time when Mrs. Weibel approached Ms. Gadus, 53, to begin discussing her story as part of the manuscript that would become "Little Victories: A True Story of the Healing Power of Horses."

"This was a story that was always of interest, to tell the story of Fieldstone Farm and how it grew and what goes on in a therapeutic riding center. And then I got the idea that it'd be better if it was personal – from someone's point of view," said Mrs. Weibel, who is an equestrian with a 30-year career in journalism and public relations. "I reached out to Debbie and she was willing to share from the beginning."

"I'm not really a public person. But if it helps Fieldstone, that's everything to me, and the equine therapy industry," Ms. Gadus said of the decision to share her story.

Mrs. Weibel, 61, published "Little Victories," which is her second book, with Brown Dog Books in October. The book follows Ms. Gadus' story of healing and becoming a leader in the field of therapeutic riding after a snow-laden riding arena roof in Chardon collapsed leaving her a paraplegic. Ms. Gadus' personal story also parallels the story of Fieldstone Farm's growth into one of the nation's leading facilities for therapeutic riding for children and adults with physical and mental exceptionalities.

"Ohio has about 40 certified [therapeutic riding] centers. So it's huge now," Mrs. Weibel said. "But back then, it was just getting going. So it (the book) intertwines Debbie's story with how this place got started and along the way tells stories from different perspectives."

Mrs. Weibel explained this story took center stage in "Little Victories" because Ms. Gadus got back in the saddle at Fieldstone Farm and then became an advocate for individuals with disabilities through her work with the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship.

"She's on committees, she speaks, she does lectures at Lake Erie College for people who are learning to teach; she's kind of come full circle," Mrs. Weibel said.

Ms. Gadus said her work with people who come for therapeutic riding uses some of the skills she had before her accident, as she details basic riding skills she was teaching as a 28-year-old into simpler steps. The lessons she teaches continue to become about more than just riding, she said.

"We're getting a lot more into the emotional end of things and [the students] do a lot of breathing and feeling the heart rates of the horses and just living in the now," Ms. Gadus explained. "The horses are very 'now' creatures. They don't tend to hang on to the things that we tend to hang on to as much."

Mrs. Weibel's goal is to raise awareness about people with exceptionalities and therapeutic riding. She said an acquaintance who is a lawyer in New York sent a note saying he had never thought about what it's like to be a person with exceptionalities, and that the book opened his eyes to how to be supportive and respectful.

"I'm hoping people look beyond the title and thinking it's a horse book, because it's really an inspirational story that I think is enlightening for everybody," Mrs. Weibel said. "I'd like people to walk away with an understanding of the value of therapeutic riding and what it can do for people. I'd also like them to learn from Debbie's story."

Mrs. Weibel added that she wrote the book to be an easier read with Debbie's narrative built in so that younger audiences around middle school age could also enjoy it. The book is available on Amazon as both an e-book and a printed copy, at Fireside Books and Schneider Saddlery in Bainbridge, Big Dees in Streetsboro and Lake Erie College Bookstore in Painesville.

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