

Hippotherapy center to re-open after 18-year hiatus



HAMBURG -- For children and adults with disabilities, learning to connect to the outside world can be a very individualized process, one that may not always follow a conventional path.

Hippotherapy, a word taken from "hippo," the Greek root for horse, combines traditional therapy techniques with the mental and physical benefits of horseback riding, enabling students to traverse that path in a unique and engaging way.

Diane Simon, certified speech-pathologist and hippotherapist, said that when she first founded her therapy center, Pedia-Rehab, in 1996, she was astounded to see how quickly her clients learned to access and focus their fine

motor skills while seated up high on horseback.

"Children who struggle to communicate can feel very isolated," she said.

"Horses are very natural communicators. They are empathetic creatures who respond to human emotion, and they can help these children learn to connect to the outside world in a way that feels more natural and organic to them."

Simon relocated Pedia-Rehab to Georgia in 1999, where she was able to grow the business into a multifaceted therapeutic solution that combined traditional speech therapy with the benefits of horseback riding. Now, after an 18-year hiatus, Pedia-Rehab has returned to the 7-acre farm in Hamburg where it all began.

Simon said that the move back to New Jersey was inspired by the desire to spend more time with her family. With her two therapy horses, Jet and Blackjack, in tow, she decided that the time had come to head north and take over the family farm.

In addition to some updates to the riding arena and stable area, Simon said that she has also constructed a quiet, heated waiting area and a private office where she can work with her clients in the barn.

"We had a lot of work to do before we could announce our official opening," she said, "but I'm very proud of what we have accomplished and I can't wait for people to come see what we have done."

Simon said that she wanted a new name to attach to her freshly renovated business. Ultimately, she settled on Top-Form Horses.

"I picked the name because "Top Form" refers to developing correct posture and trunk control on a horse which helps children achieve the gross and fine motor control needed for speech production," she said.

However, she added, since the name Pedia-Rehab already has a good reputation, she will be keeping that title as well.

Simon said that Top-Form Horses will be ready to open its doors on April 1.

"People ask me all the time how I can integrate speech therapy into a horseback riding lesson," Simon said. "When you think about it, though, horseback riding is all about communication. Students learn to use their bodies as well as their words to connect with the horse. It's a different way of looking at language, and students tend to be very responsive to it."

Though horseback riding may seem like a frightening concept to anyone who has never been in the saddle before, it tends to have a calming and focusing effect on her students, Simon said.

"This is a very natural environment for children," she said. "When they are riding, the natural rhythm of the horse serves to ground them and helps them focus on following directions, practicing their speech lessons, and staying engaged."

According to the American Hippotherapy Association, hippotherapy can have a positive effect on children with any number of communication-related disorders including autism, articulation delay, traumatic brain injury, and issues with auditory processing.

One of the biggest differences between traditional therapy and hippotherapy, said Simon, is the speed at which progress can be observed. Changes that can take months or even years in a traditional office setting, she said, can happen over the span of a just a few lessons in the arena.

"Obviously, this is a very individual process, and everyone learns at their own pace, but there is something about being up high and in a tactile environment (the saddle, the reins, the horses's manes and motion of their bodies) that really seems to jump-start the process," she said.

Simon said that students as young as 2 years old can see benefits from hippotherapy,

"It's never too late to get involved with something like this," she said, "but children are so receptive that it helps to start as early as possible."

For many families, said Simon, horseback riding and spending time at the barn becomes the perfect way to start a conversation and form a connection.

"A lot of parents have said to me that they have a hard time relating to their children or finding something in common to share with them. If horseback riding ends up being that thing that they can talk about together, then that's a great ice breaker."

Simon said that she will be offering free consultations to potential clients during the month of April.

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Top-Form Horses and Pedia-Rehab is located at 30 Beaver Run Road in Hamburg. For information, call 973-973-827-6039 or visit www.topformhorses.com.