

Riding to success

City to Saddle gives children unique opportunity

By Matthew Belson
mbelson@cnc.com

BREWSTER — Ten-year-old Teresa Anton had never been riding and she was understandably a little nervous when she sat on top of a horse 10 times her size gripping the reins. She soon realized the horse beneath her, named Another Grey, was as mellow as a long summer day.

"Your arms should feel like more of a wet spaghetti noodle than a board," said Bette Avery, instructor and owner of Woodsong Farm to Teresa as she slowly learned to coax "Grey" around the riding ring.

Teresa's week at the farm where she will learn the basics of horsemanship including riding and caring for the animals, is made possible through a scholarship from the nonprofit City to Saddle program that provides opportunities for children from economically disadvantaged households a chance to learn how to ride.

Co-founders Barbara Zenker and Kim Summers started the program in 2003 with the idea of placing youngsters into existing horsemanship programs at licensed facilities throughout Massachusetts, free of charge. This summer the City to Saddle program will send 34 youths to five different day camps, including a vaulting camp, at a cost of approximately \$600 per student.



Samantha Cotell, 9, learns the basics of how to ride a horse from instructor Bette Avery at Woodsong Farm in Brewster. Staff photo by Matthew Belson

Equipment such as helmets and boots is included.

"It's just amazing for these kids because they get an opportunity they would not otherwise have," said Summers, a riding instructor who started the first City to Saddle program with eight children at the Dana Hall Riding Center in Wellesley, where she teaches. Summers, who grew up in Chatham, said that a chance to ride a horse at Woodsong Farm when she

was 7 changed her life.

"I would have benefited from a program like this," she said.

Like most nascent nonprofit organizations, Summers said fund-raising and finding students and volunteers is a constant challenge. However, the equestrian community has been receptive with funding and providing spaces in local programs.

"We hope to go nationwide," said Summers, who explained that one of the

goals of City to Saddle is to serve as a framework for programs that can be replicated in local communities. The idea is to use existing equestrian schools and camps and allocate a number of slots for City to Saddle kids.

"Eventually, all of this would become self-sufficient," she added.

Besides Woodsong Farm in Brewster, City to Saddle is offering another program on the Cape at Grazing Field Farm in Bourne.

As to the benefits of learning to ride a horse, Avery attests the experience cannot be measured.

"The least important thing for the kids is learning how to ride," said Avery. "The most important things are the life values: the rewards of hard work and being responsible for something. Riding is constant problem solving."

Summers said that learning to ride can help build the self-esteem of girls.

"Keep in mind that you are in charge of what the horse does," she said.

Grown-ups can talk about the benefits of riding a horse, but kids still know what they enjoy.

When asked what it was like to ride Foxy, a pony, 7-year-old Rachael Hathaway from Harwich, replied, "It was fun because I got to ride backwards a little."

For more information on the City to Saddle program contact Kim Summers at 781-760-1003 or www.citytosaddle.org.