

A Horse's Friend

Where 5,000 kids have saddled up for fun and friendships

By Laurie Mercer



A Horse's Friend, Inc.
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Bette Midler sings, "You gotta have friends." And at A Horse's Friend in Rush, just about anybody older than seven and weighing less than 250 pounds can visit and get to know an ancient and kindred spirit—the horse. At these stables, the hour-long, safety-conscious, leisurely Western-style trail ride costs twenty-five dollars. That's the least expensive trail ride in Monroe County.

"Kids in the city—get them on a horse, that's the goal," says Matthew Doward, founder and director of A Horse's Friend.

At this farm, trail rides fund all of the other programs where, for sixteen years, more than 5,000 inner-city cowboys and girls have learned some truths about

confidence, trust, respect, and discipline from Doward and his herd. Many find that life requires good horse sense.

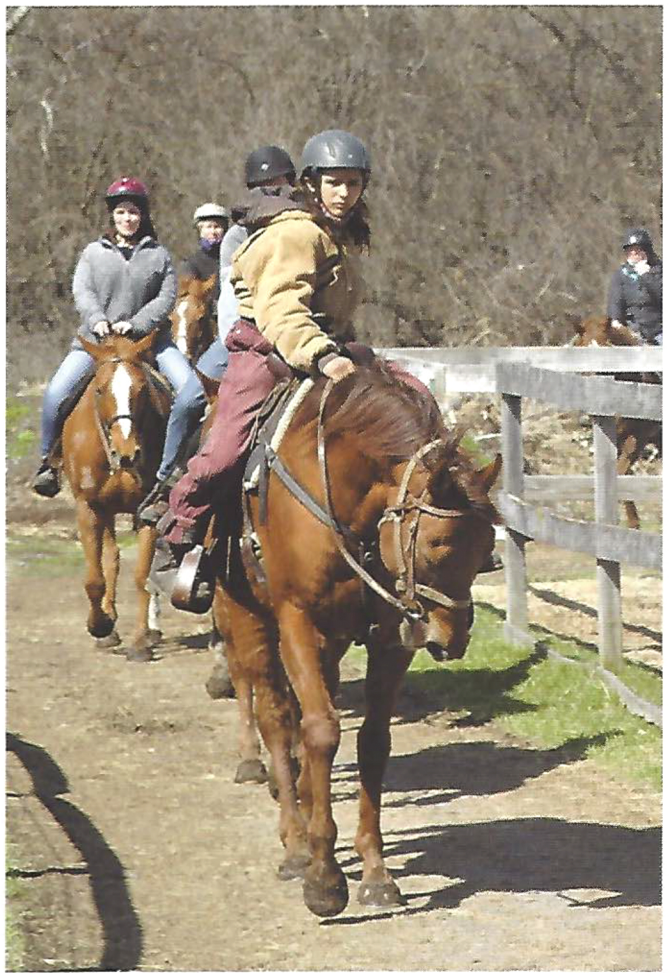
Doward takes horseback riding to a whole new dimension. His philosophy might be called "thinking outside the stall." Tall and thin, he seems to have eyes in the back of his head. On Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., the barn is buzzing. Mucking stalls, curry combing mud from the horses' coats, and even picking out the animals' mud-packed hooves. Nobody complains. It's remarkable to see children eagerly pitching the manure.

Introducing a kid from the city to horses can be challenging, but only one child has been banned for life—because he would not stop throwing rocks. "I tell them, just one incident and this whole program would disappear for good," Doward says. Around any horse, any time, the mantra is always "safety first."

Among the small squad of pitchfork-carrying kids, many pay nothing to learn to ride a horse. If a child likes the program and wants to continue, they can do so for free, as a trained mentor, for as long as they like. "If they are good and safe, they can stay here forever," Doward says. No other facility does that. For example, Erin first came at age seven and is still mentoring at twenty-two. In exchange, mentors and volunteers work in the stables and care for the horses.

Horsemanship comes with a plethora of rules. With assistance from volunteers and peers, kids begin the friendship with these large animals by nurturing them through feeding and grooming and then eventually see their hard work pay off as they saddle up for the first time.

Doward's peaceful demeanor is ideal for horses and their tendency to follow their "flight or fight" trajectory, but he never





A Horse's Friend owner Matthew Doward

comes across as a horsey brand of Mr. Rogers. His authority is unquestioned even in a farm environment that exudes outdoor fun. He never stops instructing while also witnessing the relationships between these city kids and the noble creatures slowly unfold. Doward believes that most people lack any understanding of how the impact of daily violence in Rochester plays on the minds of inner-city kids. "They don't have a backyard. Some don't even have a front yard," he says. "When they come out here to a safe place, they are afraid of everything," he says. "They will see a horse and demand, 'Why is he looking at me like that?' Even Marshmallow, the barn cat, can unnerve them. They also learn how you can be buffaloed by a horse. Overall, the goal is that hands-on experience will lead to life-long confidence."

Doward, born and raised in Batavia, learned at a young age about the joys of being around horses by the Batavia Downs racetrack. When he moved to Atlanta, he learned more about horses and riding from local cowboys. He says, "During weekends at the ranch we were surrounded by family. I liked that." He then returned to Rochester

with a written business plan for A Horse's Friend. Without any other income, he quit his job at a collision shop and began giving pony rides around Rochester with his three kids. He credits his oldest daughter with the name, A Horse's Friend. "Our goal was to get city kids on horses." They launched the venture with five horses, beginning with Baby Doll, who is still giving trail rides.

"This started on a wing and a prayer. I started knocking on doors—recreation centers, churches, schools, and nonprofits—any door we could find. We got turned down lots of times." This year the organization won the ESL Jefferson Award.

During a lunch break Doward asks how many kids have been hoodwinked by Coco Puff, a four-legged trickster who finds it impossible to be led past a food bucket without diving in. Several youngsters and one adult shot to their feet. "Now," says Doward, building to his point, "I want you to think of that bucket as a hole in the ground, and if she pulls you over to the hole, you will fall right into the ground. You must stay away from the bucket."

Doward understands the challenges facing all kids but especially those living in urban

settings. While he does not appear to play favorites, Doward says he likes fearlessness in children. He knows being around horses builds confidence. For example, Sophia eagerly pushes herself against a horse's hairy leg in order to get the animal to lift up its hoof. Sophia might weigh forty pounds, while her horse friend weighs nearly 1,000. Still, the animal cooperates.

Most horses, especially school horses, when treated with knowledge and kindness behave as if humans are in charge. Go figure. For riders of all ages and abilities, horseback riding is attributed to increases in emotional regulation, self-confidence, and responsibility, which is why therapeutic riding programs are so popular worldwide.

Of course, just about everybody has a memorable negative encounter with a horse. Doward was first run away with at age eight. Many adults are unfamiliar with the animals as well but find that the programs at A Horse's Friend can ease that stress. When responding to the size of the animal she would soon be taking for a trail ride, Buffalo resident Annette Watson exclaimed, "Oh Lord!" She and her husband, Anthony, had ridden only once before, while on vacation



in Mexico. As she grabbed the saddle horn with determination, she looked a little like someone who just got on a roller coaster by mistake. However, after their ride, the Watsons returned triumphant.

Birthday parties at the farm or elsewhere help keep the program in business, but even with a bare-bones operation, COVID hit hard. Pandemic-related restrictions initially called for a halt to trail rides. Some boarders lost their jobs and couldn't pay. The equines consume about forty bales each of hay and straw a week and two tons of grain a month. Doward was worried.


Then, surprisingly, the epidemic revealed an upside. "People are back to loving the outdoors and doing things they always wanted to do but didn't get to before. Things eased up, and we are now about 300 percent beyond where we were before COVID. Trail rides are booked solid," Doward says.

An absence of fear certainly played a big part in how Doward has come to run a complicated, volunteer-driven horse barn, offering instruction, trail riding, boarding, and occasional events. A little more than a year ago, he had to move his operations

from High View Farm in Mendon, a formerly famous show barn established by Jack Frohm. When High View was sold, A Horse's Friend began renting the forty-acre horse farm on Stoneybrook Road in Rush.

Of the twenty-six horses on the farm, eighteen are part of the program. Doward owns most of them. There are a variety of horse breeds, with different backgrounds at a Horse's Friend. In fact, Bermuda, a beautiful black Thoroughbred mare, and two other horses were once racing horses. Of Bermuda, Doward says, "She's lazy." "She doesn't even like to lunge!" Another of the horses does double time as a mounted patrol horse in Irondequoit.

Horses are often a part of wish fulfillment. And with some advance planning, A Horse's Friend welcomes anyone who wants to ride to take a potentially transformative mounted adventure, year-round along the lush Rush trails. Your world view looks very different from the back of a horse, and at a time when plenty of people of all ages need new friends, A Horse's Friend will be glad to give you a leg up.

Happy trails. 

Therapeutic riding and more

EquiCenter Inc.
3247 Rush Mendon Rd.,
Honeoye Falls
624-7777
equicenterny.org

If Hollywood wanted to film a horse farm, splendid-looking EquiCenter Incorporated would be picture-perfect. EquiCenter, a not-for-profit, serves people with disabilities, veterans, and at-risk youth through many programs, including therapeutic riding. The Assisted Learning program is for kids to learn from, but not ride, horses. EquiCenter also offers newer programs that promote the health-giving properties of gardening as well as therapeutic horticulture and a program called BEElieve in Heroes, with its own apiary. There's a lot going on, including cooking, mustang taming, coffee paired with dogs, and more. Volunteers are welcome. Contact info@equicenterny.org for more info.

Heritage Christian Stables
1103 Salt Rd., Webster
872-2540

Heritage is an accredited therapeutic riding program for children and adults that encompasses the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual values that can come from the bond formed between humans and horses. The group promotes strengthening body and mind through horseback riding, "freeing the spirit to do things they never thought possible."

Davis Trailer World
1640 Main St., York
538-6640
davisrailerworld.com

The Hunting Horn
1867 Penfield Rd., Penfield
385-9690
thehuntinghorn.com

Riding togs—both English and Western, can be pricey, which is why it's worth a visit to the Hunting Horn in Penfield. The Hunting Horn is a full-service tack shop that sports clothing and equipment, including quality used saddles, on consignment. Kid riders can outgrow their breeches and boots every season, so consignment works well.

For Western wear, nobody beats Davis Trailer World. They've got it all for Western riders—cowgirls, cowboys, and cowkids—including an ego-defining, sun-shading, ten-gallon chapeau. Maybe it's time for a new nickname and spurs.