

[ A C L O S E R L O O K A T ]

# Gleneayre Equestrian

This New Jersey program is showing at-risk young people that second chances are possible while also providing retired show horses forever homes.

By Christina Keim

Photos By Gleneayre Equestrian Program

Ellen Healey knows firsthand the transformative power of horses. Her family's Gleneayre Farm houses nearly 40 semi-retired show horses, the majority of which are in their 20s or 30s. But these special animals aren't just hanging out. They're working as teachers and therapists, helping young people facing challenges in their lives recognize that, with some support and a goal, they can make it to the other side.

Located in Lumberton, New Jersey, Gleneayre's nearly 100 acres are bisected by the rowdy waters of the Rancocas Creek. Once a gristmill, today the farm is home to Healey and her husband, Robert Healey, and the Gleneayre Equestrian Program, a

nonprofit organization dedicated to helping at-risk youth develop life skills and build character through involvement with horses. The organization offers three branches of programming: a working student mounted horsemanship experience, equine-facilitated learning and equine-facilitated mental health.

"Our goal is to keep these young people focused on horses, so they are not out there being exposed to things that might cause them to make poor choices," says Ellen, who founded the program in 1998 and was also its executive director until fall 2019. "Many come from families facing a challenge, like illness, deceased parents or suicide. These are kids that are not making it,

and their families, for whatever reason, are not able to give them what they need at this point in their lives."

## Blessings Passed Along

Ellen conceived the idea for Gleneayre after she saw the positive impact horses had on her own children. She wanted to help other young people have the same experience.

"Our family has always believed that whatever blessings you receive, you need to pass along," says Ellen.

She started lending veteran show horses to nearby children to care for and ride. But Ellen wanted to make sure these young riders had guidance and direction from someone with high



standards and a kind heart. In 2002 she approached professional trainer Jason Newman and his wife, Alison Johnson, with an idea and a vision.

“She wanted to provide a place where children and horses could come together for the betterment of each

other’s lives,” says Johnson, Gleneayre’s managing director and instructor. “She approached us at a horse show and said, ‘I like how you teach, I like your philosophy, and I like how you are with the children. And I need somebody who can help make this happen.’ ”

Little did Ellen know that Newman’s own life story mirrored that of the youths she was hoping to help. After Newman was expelled from high school, his parents shipped him off to the barn, where he worked with difficult horses cast aside by others to advance through



In the working student portion of Gleneayre Equestrian's program, young students learn everything about caring for horses in addition to groundwork and riding lessons.

the equitation classes and into the jumper ring.

"He always said that horses saved him," says Johnson. "He believed that there can be opportunities for children with no money who have the chance to be exposed to horses."

Newman died in 2013, but his influence is still felt today. His legacy of teaching, mentorship and impeccable care is taught through this "work to ride" program, with children exchanging labor for mounted and unmounted horsemanship instruction.

Potential students must apply, demonstrating a need for this program rather than traditional riding lessons. Both child and parent must express what they hope to gain from the experience.

"This is a program for children who are experiencing challenges in their lives," says Johnson. "And we leave it as open ended as that."

Applicants can be as young as 10 and may remain with the program through their first year of postsecondary education.

"We want to be that centered and grounding piece through what can be some tumultuous years," says Johnson. "They may stay involved through their 13th year of school because it is a huge transition upon graduation, and we want to be the support system while they transition into adulthood and continue their education."

The emphasis has always been on teaching horsemanship of the highest standards.

"We are trying to have this appear as a top circuit barn," says Johnson. "Kids don't have to have a lot of money to experience the best of the best. You need to be a hard working person and be diligent, and those things will bring good things in turn."

Students acquire age-appropriate

horsemanship skills through their work hours, which run from after school to 7 p.m. twice a week during the academic year, and 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. twice weekly in the summer. (Students must also work a half weekend day, year-round.) They are taught how to clean tack and assemble a bridle. They learn to body clip and wrap legs, poultice and blanket, to pull manes, braid, and clip ears and muzzles. With each visit, they also ride their project horses.

"We have a large commitment to them, but they have a commitment to us as well," says Ellen. "When you go forward in life, nothing will be given to you. You have to learn to work for what you want and to meet the commitment to your job."

## Where Horses Are The Teachers

Not long after its founding, Gleneayre started receiving donations of equipment, supplies and horses. Many of the horses were older animals with excellent training that needed to step down in their careers. These horses serve an important role within the working student program for a period of time, but their tenure as riding horses is often limited due to age or injury.

"It started to get to the point where we had all these donated horses who could no longer be ridden, and the

question was, ‘What do you do with them?’ ” says Johnson. “Getting rid of an older horse is not that easy or safe for the horse. There are so many grim stories you hear all the time.”

Johnson saw an opportunity to expand Gleneayre’s programming and also provide a new vocation for the facility’s beloved older animals with the creation of the unmounted equine-facilitated learning and equine-facilitated mental health programs. Gleneayre built a new facility across Rancocas Creek dedicated to this programming; they lovingly refer to it as the “retirement village.”

“Horses are such wonderful teachers

to help facilitate these sessions,” says Ellen. “They are so intuitive. They will reflect back the emotions going on in the human.”

Gleneayre’s equine-facilitated learning and equine-facilitated mental health programs are collaborations among equine specialists, social workers and clients, who often have little or no experience with horses.

In the EFL programs, groups of up to 20 young people (and on occasion an adult veteran) visit Gleneayre two hours a week for 10 weeks. Using a combination of cowboy lore, Native American stories and history, facilitators teach participants that

young men and women in the past had to be resourceful to survive. They then focus on a theme, such as creative thinking, and use the horse to complete an activity or task, using the relevant skill.

“There is no right or wrong way to do the activity,” says Johnson, who is Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association-certified as an equine specialist. “They learn what works and what doesn’t and figure out alternative ways to get through a problem. We then help them relate this back to their own lives.”

Many of the participants in the EFL program were juvenile offenders. On



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Thursday nights, Gleneayre partners with the Burlington County Sheriff's Department to offer a special program for some of its at-risk youth members.

"They often have failed in one aspect or another," says Johnson. "This program teaches them different ways to think about problems. So when everything is going wrong, instead of quitting, they learn that they can come up with a different solution."

Equine-facilitated mental health sessions are usually completed one-on-one, though occasionally programming is offered for small groups or families. Using a horse's response to the human's behavior, social workers and equine specialists help participants find solutions to their problems.

"We have really seen some miracles happen in these programs," says Ellen. "It really stunned me. I was not prepared for how effective they would be."

The Healeys have provided extensive personal and financial support to the Gleneayre program during its 20-plus years of service, but they are working

to ensure that it will continue long into the future. To this end, hunter/jumper trainer and rider Bill Rube joined the Gleneayre family as executive director in fall 2019, with the goal of raising greater awareness of the program and expanding its fundraising reach.

"This program really resonates with me," says Rube. "I was a troubled kid. I lost my father young, and I was lost. But I loved the horses, and if this had been something that existed when I was that age, I may have taken a different path."

Rube is open about his own struggles with addiction and the fact that horses always helped him pull through.

"Horses are such amazing animals," says Rube. "They are so intuitive. Once you let your guard down, they let their guard down, and I think that's what really works for this program. Part of what I've learned over this career is that you have to be paying it forward. I don't have money, so I give everything I have of me."

Rube and Ellen hope Gleneayre can serve as a model for similar programs in other areas.

"At this time, there is a still a population needing services that we can't support," says Rube. "This program could be a flagship for others yet to come."

The Gleneayre team is proud of its alumni, some of whom have found a permanent niche within the equine industry. But they are equally proud about providing a home and a purpose for older equines.

"You see frequently on social media posts of, 'This horse has gone to auction, but here's what it did in its past life,'" says Ellen. "We don't want the horse to end up in that situation. We can assure their owners that here, care will continue, and the horse will live out their life. This is an issue for our industry, and I am happy to work towards some solution, even on a small scale."

For Johnson, seeing the long-term growth in the children makes the challenging moments worth it.

"Watching a child who starts in this program so young, so scared or lacking the confidence to believe in herself, grow through the years into a confident young adult, and then to watch the horse who molded her become one of our wisest therapy horses, is really the best part," says Johnson. "To see the lives those horses have touched. To hear an ex-juvenile offender say, 'I learned that second chances are possible.'" 🐾

So when everything is going wrong, instead of quitting, they learn that they can come up with a different solution."

—ALISON JOHNSON