

The healing power of horses chronicled in new book

By BARRY GOODRICH

Debbie Gadus experienced a horrific, life-altering event on Jan. 17, 1993 when the roof of an equestrian riding arena in Chardon collapsed from the weight of heavy snow as she was working with a student.

Miraculously, the student was able to make a complete recovery but Gadus was left paralyzed from the waist down. Following months of rehabilitation, Gadus did not shy away from returning to equestrian pursuits. In fact, she became an ideal candidate to instruct equine-assisted therapeutic classes at the Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center in Bainbridge.

Just two years removed from her accident, Gadus became a valued member of the Fieldstone Farm staff. Her inspirational story, and the value of therapeutic horsemanship, is told in Betty Weibel's new book "Little Victories: A True Story of the Healing Power of Horses."

Weibel, an equestrian enthusiast whose career spans over 30 years as a journalist and public relations professional, provides an inside view of the world of therapeutic horseback riding in the book, which also tells the amazing story of Gadus as well as other individuals involved in the therapeutic riding world.

"Debbie's story is the thread for the book but there are a number of different stories told throughout it," said Weibel, whose 2014 book, "The Cleveland Grand Prix: An American Show Jumping First," captured the history of the annual event held at the Metropark Polo Field in Moreland Hills. "There is such a broad perspective of therapeutic riding, a topic I covered for years. I always thought there was more to it."

In addition to covering the inside world of therapeutic riding, the book also tells the inside story of Fieldstone Farm, which began as a classroom idea before evolving into one of the country's top centers with a state-of-the-art facility.

Telling Gadus' story was emotional for both subject and writer. "It was difficult for both of us," said Weibel. "Debbie was very quiet when I first approached her...I kept coming back to ask her questions about having to start over again. She shared a lot of her story with me."

As therapeutic riding constantly evolves, it has come to include participants from varied backgrounds. "Fieldstone Farms works with everyone from Wounded Warrior veterans to human trafficking victims to cancer patients' families," said Weibel.

While the book is informative, it also tells personal



Photograph by Nora Wagner

Betty Weibel (right) interviews Debbie Gadus in a classroom at Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center.

stories of those involved with the program. "All of the books I saw on this topic were really manuals," said Weibel. "This book is informational but it's also eye-opening."

"Little Victories" has been praised by Kathy Alm, CEO of the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International. "This book is a testament to the power of the horse and the strength and determination of therapeutic horsemanship participants," said Alm. "Lives are changed each day through equine-assisted activities and therapies and this story demonstrates that beautifully."

The book is available at Amazon, area independent bookstores, the Lake Erie College bookstore, Big Dee's in Streetsboro and Schneider's Saddlery in Bainbridge. Weibel and Gadus will be at Fireside Book Shop in Chagrin Falls for a book signing from 1-3 p.m., Dec. 21. A portion of book sales will go to benefit therapeutic riding centers and related programs.