

Little Victories

at Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center

By Britney Grover

Located near Cleveland in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center is one of the largest of its kind in the nation. As a Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, International (PATH Intl.) Premier Accredited Center, Fieldstone has long been a leader in the field of therapeutic horsemanship. Their influence reaches thousands of people every year, and now, that influence is expanding.

Fieldstone Farm is at center of a new book, "Little Victories: A True Story of the Healing Power of Horses," by Betty Weibel. It shares the growth and development of the industry through an up-close look at people who have both benefited and given to it, including a veteran, a horse donor and an instructor — who is also a paraplegic herself.

THE CENTER

Lynnette Stuart, a lifelong horsewoman who showed hunters, foxhunted and rode on the Ohio State University Equestrian Team, joined Fieldstone in 1992 as head instructor. Through the years, she moved into the role of program director, executive director and is now CEO, but Fieldstone's history goes back farther. "Fieldstone Farm began in 1978 when local businessman Kevin Ellison learned about the benefits of therapeutic riding and started to offer lessons out of his own backyard with a handful of horses and volunteers," Lynnette said. "He would travel to various locations on the east side of Cleveland and offered his programs to participants at organizations such as the Metzenbaum Center."

The program continued to grow, based out of leased facilities. When Lynnette came on board,

she worked hard at expanding Fieldstone's school group program, where schools would bring small groups of students to Fieldstone for weekly educational lessons, as well as the private student program, where individual students participated year-round in a designated lesson spot. In the mid-'90s, the board determined the need was great enough to warrant purchasing land and building their own facility. After a successful capital campaign, Fieldstone Farm opened its very own permanent doors in 1997.

The board had judged the needs of the community correctly. "Once we moved into the facility, we had a rapid growth period to fill the facility, which justified the need in addition to helping to cover the new overhead," Lynnette shared. "Most recently, our growth has been in the breadth and quality of our programming,

rather than in numbers, as we are pretty much at capacity in all areas."

Now, Fieldstone serves around 1,000 participants each year in its various programs. In addition to therapeutic riding and hippotherapy, Fieldstone offers carriage driving and summer camps, specially designed programs for veterans, senior citizens, those facing cancer or dealing with bereavement and even a small alternative high school.

There's a lot that goes into operating one of the country's largest therapeutic riding facilities. "At any given time, Fieldstone Farm typically has a waiting list of volunteers, horses and students," Lynnette said. "However, our needs continue to evolve, so we're always open to new



A young Fieldstone student competes at the Chagrin Hunter Jumper Classic in classes for disabled riders. Photo by Anne Gittins

interest in each of these areas. Additionally, funding is always a primary need as there are many expenses related to operating a facility and program of this size. The majority of our revenue comes from donations from private individuals, foundations and corporations. We've never turned a rider away due to inability to pay and it's our hope to always be able to provide our services to those in need."

To that end, Fieldstone hosts its annual Chefs Unbridled event: a tasting dinner led by Chefs Scott Kuhn and Chris Hodgson under a massive tent in Gates Mills. "There is always a sell-out crowd of 600 people who are treated to an evening of live music, carriage rides and an array of food trucks that complement the many delicious culinary offerings of eight to 10 local gourmet chefs," Lynnette said. "In the spring, we also hold a used tack sale and our volunteers run their own fundraising campaign to raise money specifically to help with the care of our horses."

"LITTLE VICTORIES"

Those involved with Fieldstone Farm understand that increasing awareness of the therapeutic value of horses is key to increasing support in all areas, whether it's inspiring a generous donation, a career as a PATH Intl. instructor or even pursuing helpful treatments for themselves or a loved one. That's exactly why equestrian and journalist Betty Weibel wrote "Little Victories."

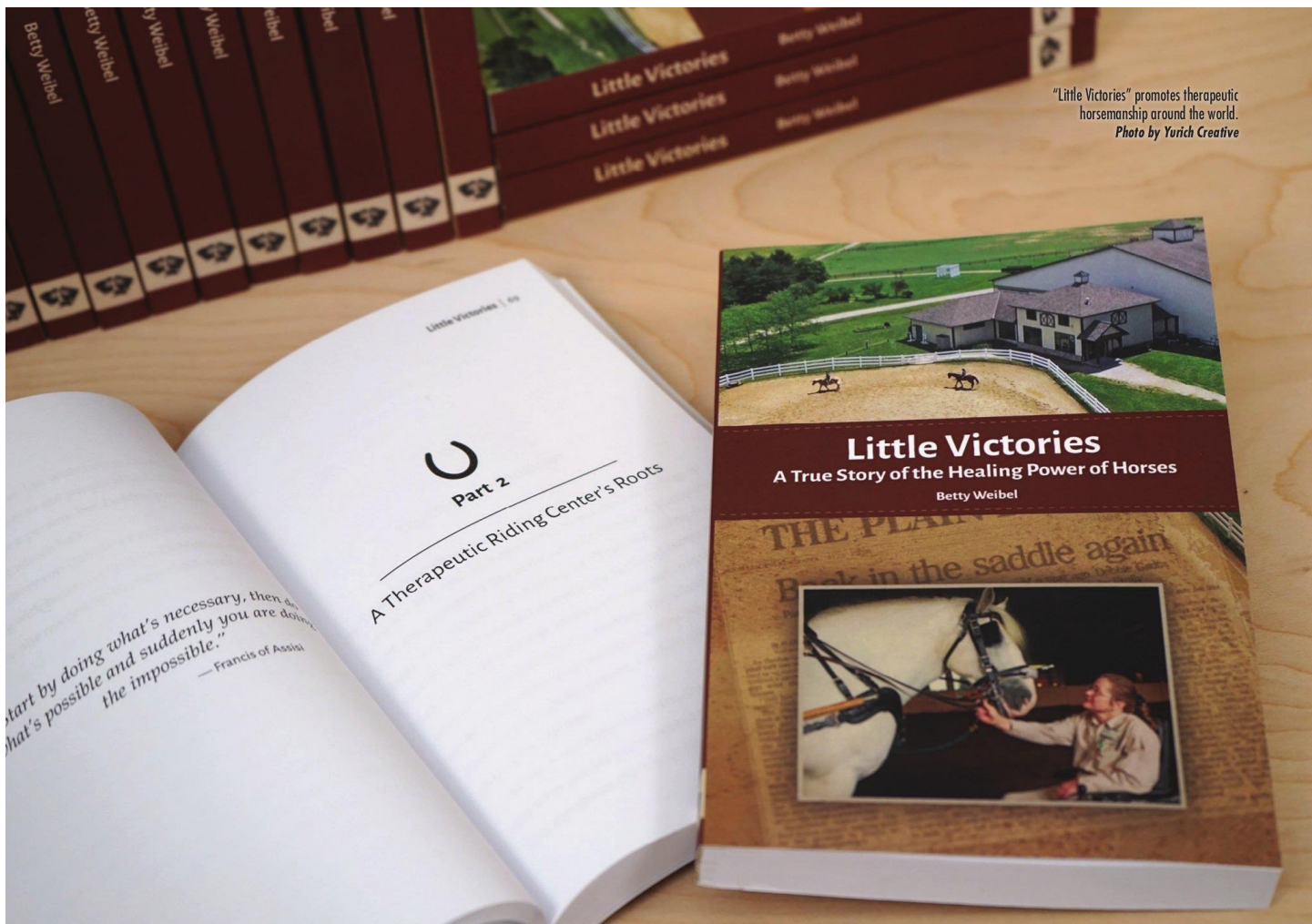
"I first got involved with Fieldstone Farm in the '90s when I heard they were going to raise money to build their own facility," Betty said. "I volunteered to help with publicity of the groundbreaking and then I just continued to volunteer whenever they needed my help. Years later, I was invited to join the board of trustees and served with a wonderful group of people, and I really got an understanding of how well the organization operates as a business. During that time, we conducted a best practices study of a number of top PATH Intl. centers. That helped me understand all the exciting innovations happening in the therapeutic riding world."

Her insight into therapeutic horsemanship centers inspired Betty to write a book about the growth and value of the field. "I originally wanted to write a book a few years ago in advance of the 40th anniversary of Fieldstone Farm, but the first draft just didn't feel right."

Instructor Lauren Simak prepares for a driving lesson.
Photo by Tammie Packer for Fieldstone Farm

Representatives of Fieldstone Farm march in the Cleveland Grand Prix festivities during the Chagrin Hunter Jumper Classic.
Photo by O'Neills Photography





"Little Victories" promotes therapeutic horsemanship around the world.
Photo by Yurich Creative

Betty shared. "I rewrote it, focusing more on the people like Debbie Gadus and her discovery of therapeutic riding and how she became disabled, as well as personal stories of staff, volunteers, students and parents, and even a horse donor. Those stories, which represent stories at centers around the world, illustrate the value of therapeutic riding programs and the impact they have on the lives of persons with disabilities."

The result was "Little Victories," featuring Fieldstone Farm instructor Debbie Gadus. "Debbie's story is truly inspirational," Lynnette said. "Even though I lived through much of it, when I read 'Little Victories,' it reminded me just how courageous she has been and how very much she has overcome. It really puts things

into perspective and is a lesson to all of us that anything can be accomplished if you have the desire and drive!"

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Debbie is a PATH certified advanced instructor and level II driving instructor for Fieldstone's driving program, which she and Sunny Jones started, all from a wheelchair she hasn't always had to use. "I worked on a Welsh Pony farm," she said. "I took care of the ponies and a few horses, feeding, cleaning stalls, grooming, exercising, helping with their training to ride and drive. I first heard about therapeutic riding from my employer,

Sunny. She volunteered at what has become Fieldstone, and suggested I consider volunteering as well. Another friend also suggested the same thing. When I started participating, I found that I was comfortable working with people with disabilities. It was challenging, fun and very rewarding."

Debbie's life changed when an arena roof at work collapsed and paralyzed her from the waist down. Therapeutic riding took on a much larger role. "Fieldstone allowed me to test myself and adaptive equipment to see what skills I had that would carry over to my new situation, using the wheelchair," she said.

Fieldstone Farm serves approximately 1,000 individuals each year. Photo by Tammie Packer



"I was able to figure out how to make some skills work in the environment of a barn, arena, on horseback, in a carriage and with people. It helped to keep me physically fit, and emotionally animals are very important to me; to be able to continue to work with and be around horses has meant *everything* to me."

Now, Debbie is helping to administer therapy to others — but that doesn't mean hers has ended. "It's a very strong therapy itself to be able to share the joy of horses with others, especially with those, like myself, who can't just go to a local barn and participate," she said. "To see the pride a student or their family has when they accomplish a skill that most people take for granted fills my heart with excitement."

It's that excitement, joy and healing that Debbie and Betty want to share with the world through "Little Victories." "My hope is to make more people aware that the equine assisted therapies are out there," Debbie said, " — that people will take advantage of them in their area if they have a need and that others will consider volunteering or supporting a program in their area."

"I hope this book will introduce more audiences, young and old, to the expanding programs and services in the world of therapeutic riding," Betty agreed. "If 'Little Victories' can open a door to new parents and students, volunteers, donors or an individual who might pursue a career path in therapeutic horsemanship, it will have done its job." ■



FIELDSTONE FARM

A Horse Can Change A Life

"Little Victories" is available in paperback and digitally on Amazon.com.

For more about Fieldstone Farm, visit fieldstonefarmtrc.com



Photos top to bottom:
Lynette and Debbie at Fieldstone Farm.
Photo by Michelle Wood Photo

Fieldstone hosting its annual Chefs Unbridled event.
Photo by Lynne Netschke