

No whispering, just horses and city kids, learning on a farm

“Who knows how you get a horse to trot?” Dale Perkins asks the campers. “You slap the reins!” yells 11-year-old Schneider. “No, that’s only in the movies,” says Mr. Perkins. “You just have to ask them. Trot, Derby.”

By **Grace Elletson**, Staff writer | SEPTEMBER 18, 2018

Rutland, Mass.

Jacqui is a draft horse with hoofs the size of dinner plates. Matthew, age 10, is working to balance himself on her broad back as she clops around in a circle.

“Great job, Matthew,” says Dale Perkins, who’s holding Jacqui’s lead line and giving gentle instruction to the young rider. “You’re doing much better than yesterday.”

Mr. Perkins is president of City to Saddle, a riding program that allows inner-city children to experience what it’s like to work on a farm and to interact with one of its largest animals: horses. He’s helping Matthew at Mesa Farm in Rutland, Mass., which is one of six sites in the state currently hosting the nonprofit’s activities. (A seventh site is in the Appalachian region.)

This program isn’t designed to produce Grand Prix riders. But for the participants, the experience of learning to work with and trust an animal can be very enriching.

“You see the kids and how much they enjoy it and appreciate it,” says Perkins, who himself grew up on a farm. “I think people who have experienced horses and farm life realize what it can do for you as an individual.” And these children “would never have that opportunity” without programs like City to Saddle, he says.

The nonprofit was officially founded by Barbara Zenker and Kim Summers in 2004. About 700 children have been involved in City to Saddle programming since 2013, Ms. Zenker estimates.

Many of the participants come from low-income families living in the Massachusetts cities of Worcester, Brockton, and Boston. Often they’re already involved in some type of youth program, which is then connected to a City to Saddle host farm.

For six weeks in the summer, Perkins hosts groups of about eight to 10 children every weekday at Mesa Farm. They often start the day with barn chores, such as feeding his ferociously hungry flock of baby lambs, and then go for a hayride.



Dale Perkins of the nonprofit City to Saddle teaches Schneider, age 11, how to trot on a horse named Derby in Rutland, Mass. The program allows inner-city children to experience what it's like to work on a farm and to interact with one of its largest animals. (Laura Cluthe/The Christian Science Monitor)

During one day's ride, Perkins is asking questions to those from a Worcester YMCA group, both quizzing and informing the children about farm life. (The youths in this article are all participants in the YMCA, which requested that the children be referred to by their first names only.)

"Who knows how you get a horse to trot?" Perkins asks.

"You slap the reins!" yells 11-year-old Schneider.

"No, that's only in the movies. You just have to ask them. Trot, Derby."

Pop culture seems to guide the children's expectations of farm life. Schneider, for example, looks for a piece of hay with the perfect fluff of grain on the end, the stem fitting between his teeth so he can gnaw on it as any classic cowboy would.

"It's really fun being at an actual farm and working at an actual farm," he says. "The only gross part about it is picking up poop."

A history with horses

It's been almost 10 years since Perkins got involved with City to Saddle and three years since he became president. Growing up on a farm in Minnesota, he started working with horses at the age of 5. Today, he's a therapeutic riding instructor certified by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International, and he specializes in the mental health needs of riders.

In addition to hosting the City to Saddle summer program at Mesa Farm, Perkins organizes the fundraising efforts for the nonprofit, including 5K runs and farm-to-table dinners.

Perkins was brought on as president in 2015 to build the program into a collaborative effort, says Zenker, who is now chair of the organization. His calm temperament and expertise with horses, she says, have made him the perfect fit.

"[Perkins] has this depth of experience, and he's amazing with children," she says. "He has a calm, nurturing, empathetic way of dealing with each child. He doesn't push a child; he evolves children. He allows them to work and learn at their own pace."

When AJ, age 12, arrived at Mesa Farm, he had never ridden a horse before. He says that when he first got on, the feel of a living, breathing, massive animal between his legs was scary. But he learned to overcome his fear.

"I just like working with the horses," AJ says. "I get to be very interactive with the animals. It's a new experience for me."

In fact, by the end of his first day AJ was vaulting on horseback – a type of "gymnastics" routine, as Perkins describes it, that involves doing different acrobatic-like poses on top of a moving horse.

On this day, the children are practicing their vaulting routines with Judy, a 2,000-pound draft horse even bigger than Jacqui that towers over Perkins, never mind the children who come up only to his waist. Although wobbly, the youths perform the precarious positions with ease. Arguably the most ambitious move is "stand," which, as it sounds, demands that the rider stand pin straight on top of the moving horse. It's mastered by almost every child who takes on the challenge.

Working with the horses, says Zenker, who is a horseback rider herself, teaches the children practical lessons about life.

“It’s transformational for these kids,” she says. “You take an animal weighing more than a ton, a very large animal that looks uncontrollable – or certainly not anything that you would be able to handle – and by learning quietness, patience, empathy, and listening, you learn that in fact this animal can become a partner of yours.”

She emphasizes how the equine interactions can help the children with other relationships in their lives. “Horses are very sensitive, and they’re wonderful partners, but you can’t bully them; they’re too big,” she says. “So the kids have to learn how to show empathy and peace when they’re with an animal, and that translates into their relationships with others.”

A confidence builder

Sarah Levy, director of child-care services at the Worcester YMCA, has also seen how the children develop as a result of City to Saddle. She’s been bringing youths to Mesa Farm for years and says their confidence grows “immensely.”

“Dale ... never forces them. He encourages them and tries to get them to push themselves and overcome some of their fears,” Ms. Levy says. “By the end of the week, they’re doing something that they wouldn’t have done at the beginning of the week. And that, to me, is amazing.”

For some, the program’s effect has stayed with them for years. When Katie Wainwright started riding at Mesa Farm through a City to Saddle program when she was 10, she says she was an anxious little girl who was too shy to speak. But at the farm, she says, she fell in love with the outdoors and the horses and blossomed into a stronger, more communicative person.

Katie was given a scholarship through the program to take lessons with Perkins. City to Saddle paid for her boots and riding helmet, too.

“If they hadn’t given to me, I wouldn’t have this opportunity, and who knows, I could have been completely different today,” says Katie, who is now 17.

She says Perkins’s support has been pivotal to her growth. “Dale is probably one of the kindest, most hardworking people I’ve ever met in my entire life. He gives so much to other people, and he doesn’t ask for very much in return,” she says.

Perkins says the reason he does this work is simple: He’s glad to bring happiness into the lives of children who need it most.

“My wife and I feel very blessed to have a facility like this and to be able to do these types of programs,” he says. “So that makes it a joy to be able to share it.”

• *For more, visit citytosaddle.org.*

Three other groups with a focus on animals

• **UniversalGiving** helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations around the world. All the projects below are vetted by UniversalGiving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause.

• **Romania Animal Rescue** aids animals from poor areas, with a focus on spay and neuter services. Take action: Financially support this organization’s Homeless Animal Hospital Project.

• **Pan African Sanctuary Alliance** secures a future for Africa's primates and their habitat through a collaboration of African sanctuaries, communities, and governments plus global experts. Take action: Make a donation to help rescue an animal from cruelty.

• **Let Kids Be Kids** is an advocate for disadvantaged individuals as well as animal species that are at risk. Take action: Contribute to funding for the support of endangered species.

© The Christian Science Monitor. All Rights Reserved. Terms under which this service is provided to you. Privacy Policy.