Island youth find equine engagement

BY HARDY EVILLE

Misty Meadows is an equine learning center in West Tisbury that has been providing teenagers and children with opportunities to interact with and learn alongside their 11 horses. During the school year, they organize programming that serves an average of 65 Island students of all ages each week.

Junior Mya O’Neill has been working with Misty Meadows since the center was first established on the Island in 2017, and she has learned a great deal from her time there. “We work with Island Autism, and with people with disabilities,” Mya said. “Horses are a great way to help anyone with disabilities,” Mya said. “Horses are used in therapy, and working with people with different abilities is a great way to help people communicate better.”

Executive director Sara McKay supervised that training, and was also working on desensitizing Piper to the mounting block, a platform that makes it easier for people to mount a horse. “A horse’s instinct is flight, so when they get scared or feel unsafe, their instinct is to move away quickly,” Ms. McKay said. “We want to make sure that [the mounting block] doesn’t represent something that scares them.”

According to Ms. McKay, some of the more advanced student riders, like Mya and Clara, are capable of doing more than desensitizing horses. “To try to keep these students engaged, learning more, and staying connected as a group, we do something called drill team,” she said. “The drill team focuses mostly on synchronized riding during practice, which involves a choreographed routine and requires riders to practice different maneuvers in sync, while on different horses. It’s a lot harder than it looks,” Ms. McKay said. “Each horse has its own gait, and horses have different personalities. Some horses hate each other. You have to work with your own personal horse, get to know them, and kind of specialize what you do in the drill to make it happen.”

In addition to teaching students about horses, Misty Meadows strives to provide students with opportunities to learn life skills, such as trust and nonjudgment, through interactions with horses. “The head stories of some kids being quieter and shy and once they finish an eight-week program, they’re super outgoing, talkative and will go to a random stranger and say hi, which they couldn’t do before,” Mya said. “It brings out the best in children and people in general.”

Senior Karinne Nivala, who is homeschooled, has been working with horses all her life, and joined the Misty Meadows staff in 2020. “A lot of people find horses scary to be around,” she said. “So seeing little kids working with [horses] despite the fears, and overcoming them, can really boost confidence in all the kids, and improve social skills. If someone has social anxiety, a horse can be like a mediator.”

Karinne also feels that Misty Meadows offers a unique experience for learning to ride horses, and she is working on getting an instructor’s license. “Misty really takes a holistic approach to evaluate everyone’s needs and wants for working with horses, and allows everyone to go at their own pace,” she said. “So if a kid wants to come here they don’t even have to ride if they don’t want to, or if they don’t feel comfortable.”

On a recent Saturday morning, students were working to train Piper, a new 13-year-old horse that requires desensitization in order to safely interact with children and other riders. The team used Hula-Hoops, pool noodles, tennis balls, and blankets as they worked to prepare Piper for any situation. Sophomore Falmouth Academy student Clara Ahearn, who was working with Piper, said, “If you were a horse, you wouldn’t like those things in your face. At the beginning of the lesson, [Piper] was pretty freaked out about the Hula Hoops, but then he got put into the group, and he got used to it.”

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