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HORSE FARM

Neigh-neighborhood connections

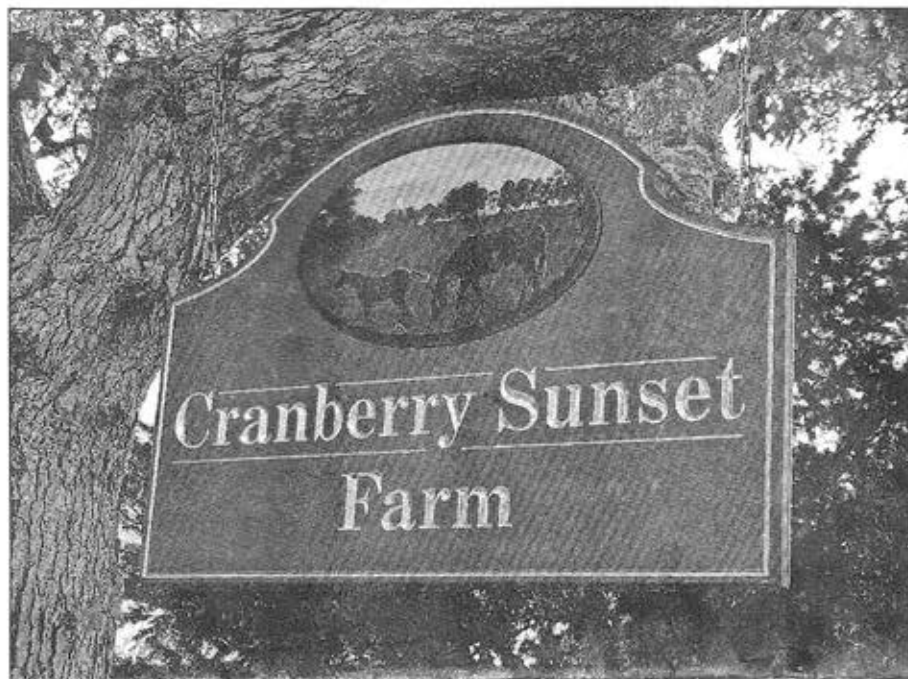
Cranberry Sunset Farm programming helps kids with special needs

By Rachael Devaney
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Cranberry Sunset Farm is reminiscent of the land of Oz. With its wooded trails, cranberry bog views, brightly colored animal mailboxes and rustic tipis, the Marstons Mills farm is also a center for connections between people and animals.

The 30-acre property, a riding center and horse and animal rescue sanctuary that partners with Equine Angel Rescue Sanctuary in Connecticut, is also a safe haven where kids of all ages and abilities, particularly those with "extra" needs, can learn to ride horses and enjoy the farm's sensory trail systems. The winding paths, which feature obstacles like dangling pool noodles, huge brightly colored apples that sway from the tree branches and a variety of games like hand toss that can be found along the way, challenge the children's balance, coordination, vision and hearing, and can help prepare their brains to function more effectively in the wider society.

For Leslie Ballotti, who co-founded the farm, explained that the sensory trails are also accompanied by gardening programs, dance, music and movement classes and interaction with the many other animals that live on the farm. Those animals include goats, mini-horses, cows, chickens, rabbits and dogs. Ballotti said it's the "wonders of nature"



Leslie Ballotti shows off her two horses Bimba, left and Bambi, right.

LEFT: Cranberry Sunset Farm in Marstons Mills. PHOTOS BY RACHAEL DEVANEY

humans and animals "was magical." One time in particular, Ballotti recalled helping an autistic child ride for the first time - his face beaming with what she called a "cherubic smile." His mother, who was watching from the sidelines, stood with tears streaming down her face, and revealed that it had been six years since she had seen her son show emotion. It was after that one instance that Ballotti decided to dedicate herself to the year-round program.

"It's this simple sense of presence that comes from these animals that helps the kids socialize," Ballotti said. "It's just the easiest thing to put kids back into nature with animals, and they become so relaxed as the relationship progresses."

For Ballotti, her partner Peter Dyrness and their many volunteers, each day is full of activity, catering to nearly

schools, or organizations like CapeAbilities and Community Connections, Inc. While the farm serves hundreds of people a year, Ballotti still fields at least half a dozen new calls each week from parents who are looking for a therapeutic riding program for their children. With one child in 58 diagnosed with autism and 25 percent of school age children in Massachusetts diagnosed with autism each year, according to Ballotti, she feels that the number of those that need help will continue to climb. Because staff is hesitant to turn anyone away, the hours can be grueling - sometimes reaching 16 hours a day, seven days a week.

"We are making the sacrifice because we know how much it means to the parents and we see how much the kids benefit from it," Ballotti said. "And it's a great endeavor but we do need more grants and

can be found in New York are charging roughly \$75 to \$100 per therapeutic riding lesson, and are operating on \$1.5 million budgets, compared to Cranberry Sunset Farm's free programming and \$130,000 budget, which is in part funded by the Kennedy-Donovan Center. Dyrness said they are desperately in need of funding that can help them pay support staff, as well as additions to the farm like an outdoor classroom setting, an observation area for parents and additional horse stalls.

"We want to get to the stage where there's more money coming in, and enough money to be able to hire quality people that are trained in how to help those with severe problems," Dyrness said. "Everybody is trying here, and everyone has a big heart, but we are dealing with animals, kids and equipment and we need key people

nutrition, sets off to work every day with a smile and feels that she, too, learns something new every day.

It's been 12 years since she rescued her first horse, named Capricious, after her own horse was stolen during her move from Italy back to the United States. It was shortly thereafter that she noticed the effect that Capricious had on a friend's child who had been diagnosed with autism, and called the experience "extraordinary." From there she soon took on 12 more horses and not only found herself with her own "herd" but a passion for horses and for children with special needs.

"Animals don't say anything back, they are just giving, and I think people will start talking to them and sharing their thoughts, and that's the magic," she said. "It's a calmness, a connection and I'm so happy to be a part of that."