

Equine Therapy

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Ryanne, 7, reaches for a plastic apple at Cranberry Sunset Farm in Marston's Mills, while farm owner Leslie Bakotti (far right) and her daughter, Kara Bakotti (center), give her words of encouragement. The apple is meant to draw riders out of their inner worlds to effectively communicate their intentions.

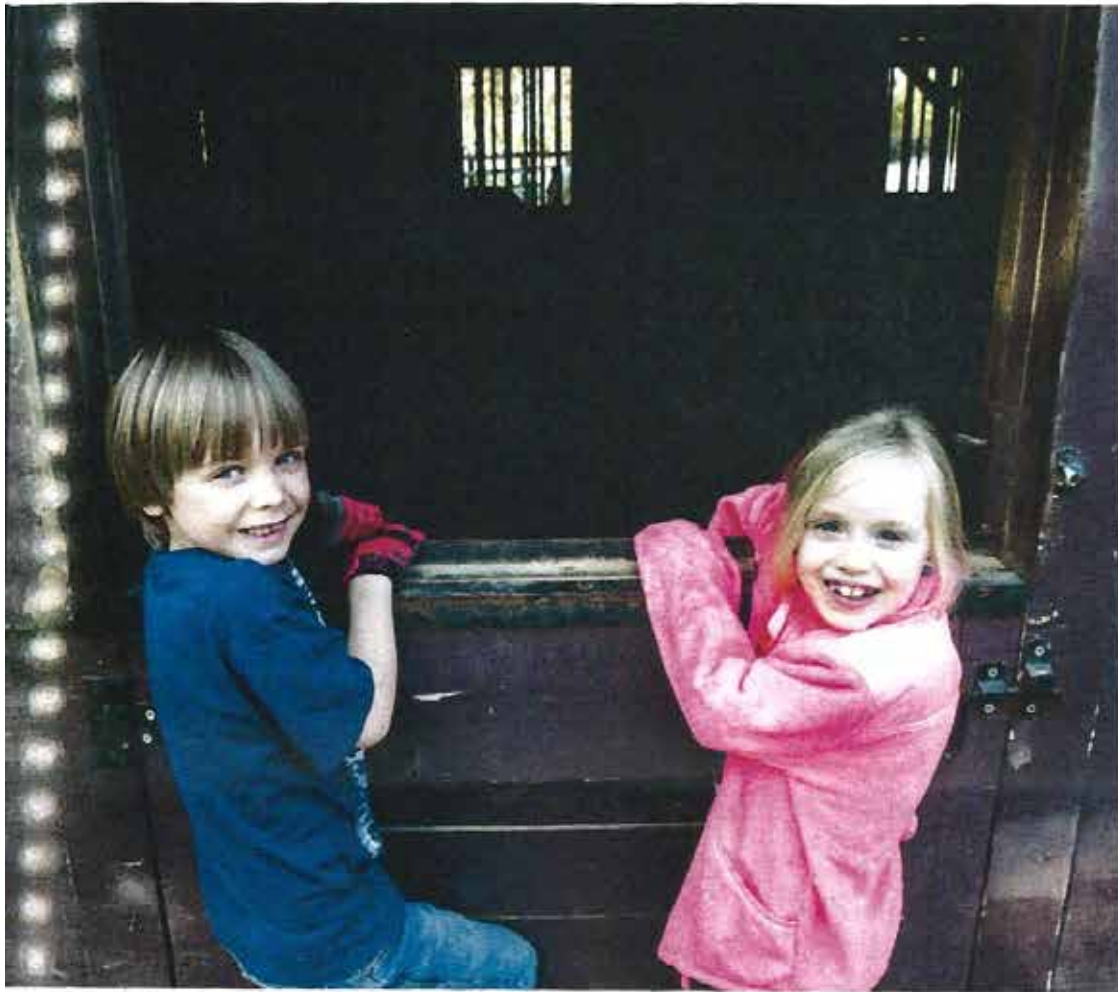
At Cranberry Sunset Farm in Marstons Mills, children with physical and emotional problems interact with horses to improve motor coordination, social skills and language development. Even better, every kid just seems happier after spending time with a horse.



“Say please and thank you.” That’s rule No. 1 at Cranberry Sunset Farm in Marstons Mills, according to the bright yellow sign nailed to a fence near the entrance. It’s a far cry from the barn rules you’ll find posted at most equestrian centers, where riders are expected to feed, water and groom the horses. That’s because former pediatric nurse Leslie Ballotti created this place on an entirely different model. Equestrian tradition, etiquette and proper attire—none of these were priorities for this fearless mother of four. Her vision was to create a sanctuary.

“Love each other,” insists the bright yellow sign. “Use kind words. Do it right the first time. Help one another. Share. Forgive quickly. No whining. Have fun.” That’s exactly what you’ll see if you show up at the farm during Cowboy Camp, where kids of wide-ranging abilities and ages can pick vegetables, groom Shetland ponies, gather eggs, make crafts and do yoga. Creating a healthy community can be as simple as putting a few basic principles into practice while connecting with others and the natural world, Ballotti believes, and she’s been proving it daily since 2005.

Opposite page: A: Cranberry Sunset Farm, creativity and craft making are encouraged during summer camp. This page (counterclockwise): Cameron, 7, and Ryanne, 7, hang onto a stable door; a bright yellow sign listing a set of rules greets visitors at the farm's entrance; and a garden planted at the farm last spring features inspiring signs.





"Snowflake" is one of two Shetland ponies at Cranberry Sunset Farm. Opposite page: Ava the dog, Daisy the cow and Sweetheart, a rescue horse, all create a welcoming environment for the 75 children who come here each week for help with motor coordination, social skills and language development.

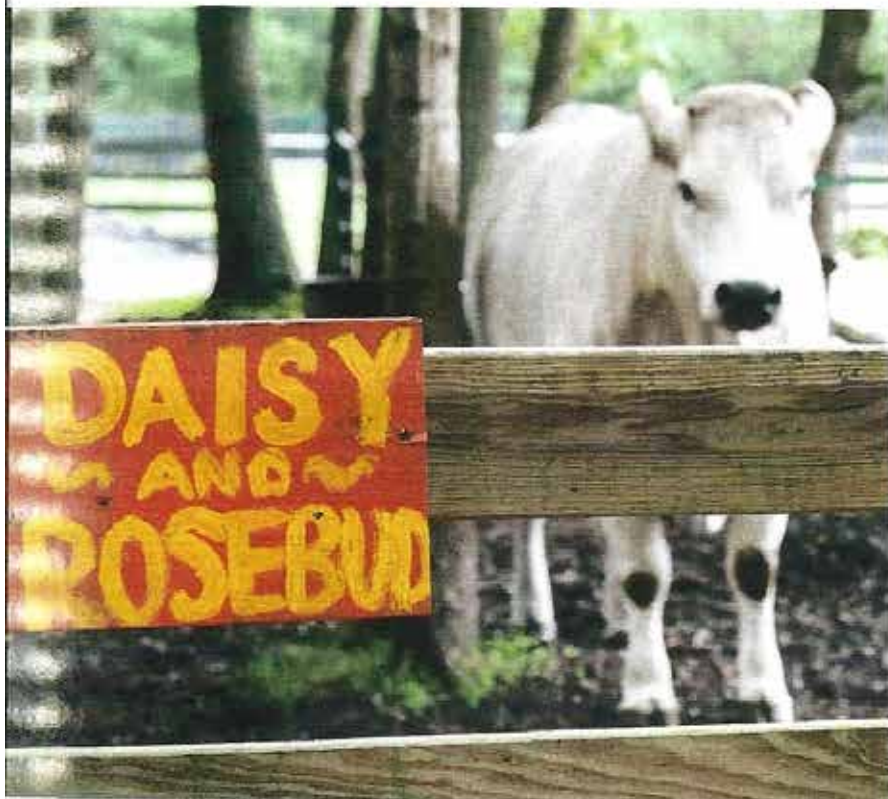
Some of the 75 kids who come here each week have little trouble abiding by the barn rules. But minding P's & Q's poses a challenge for the third of the children whose autism has rendered them non-verbal. Those who do speak often miss the social cues that neurotypical people consider obvious. Fortunately, such linguistic lapses mean nothing in the company of horses.

The rescue mission

Cranberry Sunset Farm is one of those beautiful things born out of loss. In the process of moving her family back to the U.S. after years spent in Europe, Ballotti's beloved horse was stolen. She looked everywhere but, baffled, found only animals that others no longer wanted. Acquired as novelty items when the stock market bubble was at its fullest, these horses were being

abandoned by their owners at a staggering rate after it burst.

Meanwhile, Ballotti had noted with similar alarm a sharp rise in the number of children diagnosed with autism and related disorders. Though none of her four daughters was affected, she didn't feel that let any of them off the hook when it came to facing a community-wide challenge. When the Ballottis began volunteering as a family at a Connecticut barn, they witnessed firsthand the effects of hippotherapy, a method of using equine movement to improve function in individuals with autism. A growing body of research confirmed the benefits they had observed, proving time and again that regular treatment led to marked improvement in motor coordination, sensory regulation, social skills and language development. More important, perhaps, every kid just seemed happier after spending time with a horse.



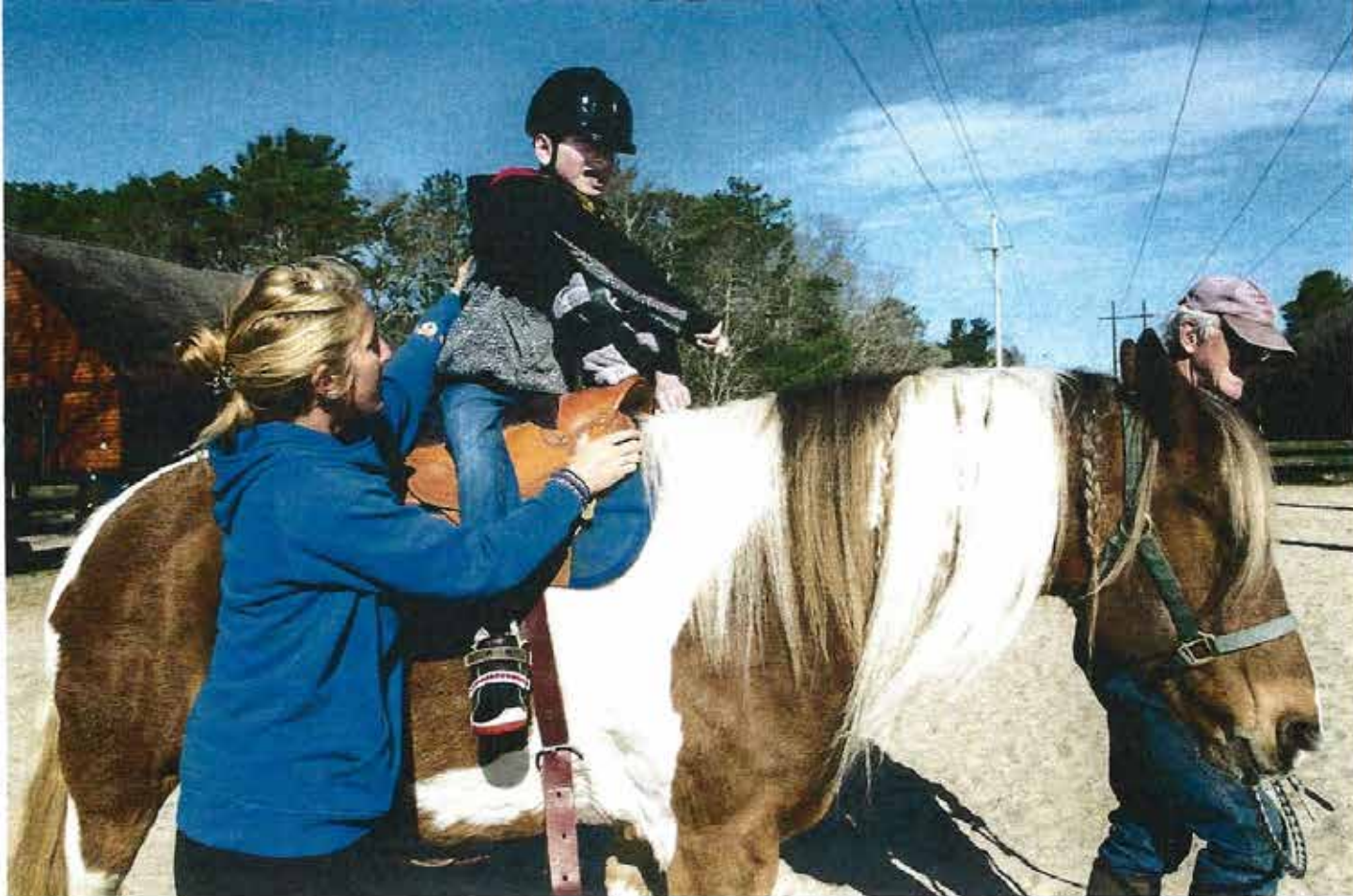
To establish an effective therapeutic practice that combined her commitment to helping children thrive with her resolve to rescue horses, Ballotti understood that she would need a partner with intimate knowledge of the equine mind. By a stroke of serendipity, she walked off a fox hunt and met Peter Dyrness. "He speaks horse," Ballotti says of Dyrness. "I speak children. We're total opposites. It's perfect."

She also understood that she'd need her own set of rules. Cranberry Sunset wouldn't be a typical hippotherapy farm any more than it would resemble an elite equestrian center. In fact, horses would be sharing her 35-acre paradise with goats, chickens, cows and rabbits. The farm's programs wouldn't be geared exclusively toward children with special needs but to their siblings and parents as well, and anyone else who might like to join in. Leslie's own four daughters would be shoveling horse manure alongside all of the other volunteers.

Rule 2: Play Nice

On this particular day, 11-year-old Kai is riding Capricious—the horse that wears his name with irony. If the animal was ever erratic in character, Dyrness must have trained it out of him long ago. He leads him along one of the farm's many paths through the woods, where mirrors on the trees remind these children where they are in the world: here, now, riding a big animal. Presenting a visual of how they are connected to other living beings and to their environment helps kids form a clearer sense of self.

Leaning forward over the custom saddle that Dyrness designed specifically for Kai's body, he passes a mailbox painted to look like a rubber ducky. It's not clear whether or not Kai's noticed it, or the plastic blowfish dangling from a nearby branch or the forest of foam noodles he has just passed through. In addition to the cerebral palsy that makes it difficult for this 11-year-old to even sit up, Kai is essentially blind.



Kara Ballotti, above, assists Kai, 11, who is unable to support himself but loves to ride. At bottom, Cameron, 7, helps Peter Dyrness move bales of hay. Opposite page, top to bottom: Allison, 12, holds a chicken; Cameron, 7, talks to Kara in one of the stables; and everyone has a role to play at Cranberry Sunset Farm.



behind and runs 3.6 miles pushing him in a stroller. This petite teacher with Cape Cod's Calmer Choice program is a powerhouse determined to keep pace with her son's growth.

When she first sought out an equine therapy program, many barns turned her away on the basis that they were ill equipped to deal with Kai's condition. Then she found Cranberry Sunset, where he has even been allowed to experience the thrill of trotting. "He loves it," Stephanie laughs. "He's a boy! He has a need for speed." In her opinion, the world needs more people like Ballotti—that is, more people willing to say yes.

Rule 3: Play Nice

"For all of Kai's challenges, he's still the happiest kid I know," explains his mom, Stephanie. That's due in large part to his family's commitment to making him as comfortable as possible in his body and their insistence on including him in all their adventures. Every September, Stephanie takes her son along on the Hyannis Sprint II Triathlon, in which she swims a quarter mile while pulling Kai in a boat, bikes 10.2 miles with him riding along

On the swingset near the vegetable garden, 12-year-old Torin is laughing and pumping energetically, goats and miniature horses milling about in the pen at his back. This laughter, this ease, this is Torin at his best. He has come a long way since arriving at Cranberry Sunset in 2010.

"For a full year, I practically dragged him here kicking and screaming," recalls Kerri, who quit her job when it became clear that school was not a suitable option for her son. Struggling with undiagnosed Crohn's disease and severely affected by autism, Torin was constantly in pain but unable to communicate the source of his distress. Food felt like poison. Animals



terrified him. The world was a constant assault on his senses. By the time they found this place, Kerri's nerves were frayed to the point of snapping.

"Just keep coming, they told us," Kerri remembers, still incredulous at Ballotti's and Dyrness' superhuman patience, their generosity and their intuitive approach to this challenging work. Eventually, Torin came to realize he'd rather be on horseback than hoofing it through the woods on foot. And just like that, the tantrums stopped and everything suddenly clicked.

"Now look at him," Kerri marvels, as she watches her son mount Big Duke, grinning ear to ear. Horseback riding has become Torin's main incentive for completing the daily tasks he finds so challenging, like dressing and brushing his teeth. Even his speech has increased dramatically.

"It all started with Leslie wanting to save horses," Kerri recalls. "Now, they're basically saving families." 🍀



*Cranberry Sunset Farm, 1964 Main St.,
Marstons Mills, cranberrysunsetfarm.com*



OCTOBER FUNDRAISER

Cranberry Sunset Farm will hold a You Pick Harvest fundraiser 1-4 p.m. on Sunday, Oct. 29, rain or shine. All families are invited to pick cranberries from the bogs and enjoy a magic show and crafts for children, a spooky Halloween trail walk, green market vendors, food trucks, a yoga workshop and a wool-spinning demonstration.