

## **When A Special Horse Retires**

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I should have been happy, as it was the start of summer and SMART would be closed for two months to provide a well-deserved break to volunteers and horses during the oppressively hot Florida summer. But I just learned that my favorite horse, Lee, who had been with the program even longer than my ten year tenure, would not be in his stall when we returned in September. He would be retired to a farm for aging horses, and I knew that SMART would never quite be the same; nor would I.

Lee was already there when I became a SMART volunteer. I didn't know much about his background, but he obviously arrived with some great early childhood training, a big heart, intelligence, and a good deal of patience. I often thought about how difficult it must have been for his previous owner to part with him.

In the early days, Lee's Arabian pedigree sometimes influenced his behavior. Some people even said that he would never make a good SMART horse; he was too spirited and would never settle down. I knew from the beginning that his spirit was just that, and not meanness, and given the proper guidance by the competent SMART staff, he would be just fine. This small, handsome chestnut gelding would just need a little more time and attention than most horses to become accustomed to his special life; for in spite of his abundant spirit, he enjoyed volunteers working closely with him during classes, and the riders loved him.

Tara was the very first student with whom I worked. It was great to see her leave her wheelchair behind for one hour each Saturday morning and ride Lee. She appreciated his spirit, beauty, and heart; she, too, had these qualities. Three volunteers worked with Tara, two side walkers and a horse handler, and Lee took all this activity in stride. We volunteers watched Tara closely, and this resulted in numerous jabs and leaning on Lee's flanks, but this never upset him. He was even a perfect gentleman when Tara rewarded him with carrots after each lesson, as he took them gently from her hand.

About five years ago, twin boys, Micah and Shane, started riding at SMART. They were quick learners and soon were ready to begin cantering. Lee was the teacher of choice for these enthusiastic boys, since he had the smoothest canter of all the horses, not to mention that he was built closest to the ground! But there was no danger. Shane and Micah took turns learning to canter on Lee, even bareback!

Andrew, an adult rider, was also a Lee "regular." Andrew arrived on Saturdays with a big smile and unbridled enthusiasm to mount Lee and ride independently. Andrew and Lee made a great team, the only "problem" arising when Lee occasionally brought Andrew to the center of the arena for a "pet" from a volunteer, or to the arena fence to greet an observer. Although frowned upon by the instructor, this gave Andrew, and all of us, many good laughs.

Last year Lee was put on "light" duty, as he was beginning to develop challenges due to aging. He was now in his mid twenties and it was time for him to start taking it easy. So although I knew it was in both his and the program's best interest to retire him, it was indeed a sad moment when the reality of the situation hit.

Lee played a major role in making a wonderful program successful. SMART will get another horse to replace him, and the program will continue to succeed and thrive. I will take comfort in knowing that Lee, after providing so much joy to so many people, is happy in his new home. No, I

can never be the same now that Lee is not at SMART. I am a better person for having had the honor of knowing and working with this noble creature.