

## **A Parent's Perspective**

By Bethany M. Mezzadra

Riding Instructor Kathleen Sigmund of Nashville, Tennessee and her pony Pumpkin have spent the past two years working with my daughter Kate, a seven-year-old student diagnosed with moderate retardation accompanied by a profound hoarding loss. Although it was understood that Kate's progress would be slow, Kathleen Sigmund rose to the challenge and has provided Kate with a multi-sensory learning environment coupled with tremendous patience, encouragement, repetition, praise and reward. During the past year, Kate underwent cochlear implant surgery. Learning to adapt the lesson to a "newly hearing" child was another obstacle met head-on by this fabulous instructor. Additionally, occupational therapy was recommended for Kate due to rigidity of her leg muscles and difficulty in motor planning. All of the professionals now working with my daughter have noticed something that Ms. Sigmund pointed out two years ago - Kate finally relaxes when she is bouncing or rocking. The movement of the pony clearly calms her, giving way to the production and imitation of sounds and body movement.

The customary riding lesson has been tailored to meet the needs of this particular student. We have incorporated the use of pictures, sign language, and a great deal of repetition in order to reach Kate on multiple sensory levels. The touching and grooming of Pumpkin play a vital role as well. The barn has been specially redesigned with a saddle rack that this short stature equestrienne can reach as well as Kate's "special stool". Of course, rider safety is always at the forefront of every lesson. All students must wear the proper attire, including helmets. Spotters are provided as necessary.

Knowledge of the student's particular disabilities enables the teacher to focus and reach the student more readily. Kathleen has shown an amazing willingness to study and learn about Kate's disabilities in order to make the experience a positive one for both the rider and the instructor. She has now seen, first hand, the improvements in Kate's comprehension of the grooming and dressing of the pony. Also, the physical therapy aspects- balance, body positioning, squeezing knees, hands on her head, closing eyes, etc., have made Kate much more aware of herself as an individual.

Kathleen Sigmund fully understands that there are good and bad days from a cooperation standpoint and she has learned to use direct motivation techniques to assist the student when necessary. An advantage of the one-on-one approach is the lack of distraction from other students and horses. Also, the teacher is precisely aware when the individual's saturation point has been reached and sensory overload is imminent.

The past year has seen great strides in the development of my daughter. The excitement is evident as we arrive at the barn. We see the seven-year-old toothless grin as Kate grabs for her boot, hat, and pony treats. Her willingness to cooperate and "get with the program" are an unbelievable accomplishment and due only to the trust and faith in Kathleen Sigmund...and a wonderful pony named Pumpkin!

Bethany M. Mezzadra  
Mother