

CITY TO SADDLE

Janet Mitchell, a teacher and single mother from Chatham, tearfully describes how her adopted daughter, Laura, a shy 10-year-old, blossomed after a week of Pony Kids camp at Woodsong Farm in Brewster. "She's opened up," says Mitchell. "Just watching her ride the last day of camp, watching her smile, sitting up on the horse confidently. Being in a new situation is very tough for Laura, but she was smiling. For me, that was 'Wow!'"

Laura is one of a dozen or so Cape Cod children from low-to-moderate income families who attended last summer's equestrian program at Woodsong Farm. The program is the result of a successful collaboration between the farm, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Cape Cod & the Islands, and an innovative nonprofit organization called City to Saddle.

With a horse costing as much as a luxury car—and annual boarding, equipment, and lesson fees rivaling private school tuition—horseback riding is out of reach for many. Fortunately, two women wanted to share the life-enhancing benefits of horsemanship with children who might not otherwise experience them.

In 2003, Chatham native Kimberly Summers, an accomplished riding instructor who mucked stalls to pay for lessons as a teen, along with Falmouth summer resident and avid rider Barbara Zenker, founded City to Saddle to make horseback riding accessible to more children. Through tireless, all-volunteer fundraising and outreach, City to Saddle works with local youth agencies and equestrian facilities to bring children to summer riding camps free of charge.

City to Saddle has sponsored children at Woodsong Farm for three years, but 2007 was the first year the organizers linked with Big Brothers Big Sisters to find eligible campers. Katherine Reilly, Lower Cape Program Director for Big Brothers Big Sisters, saw City to Saddle as an opportunity for kids to do something new when school was out. The first camp session won her over completely. "The looks on their faces," says Reilly of the campers. "They were beaming."

For many campers, such as Laura, riding opens up the



Kimberly Summers and Katherine Reilly

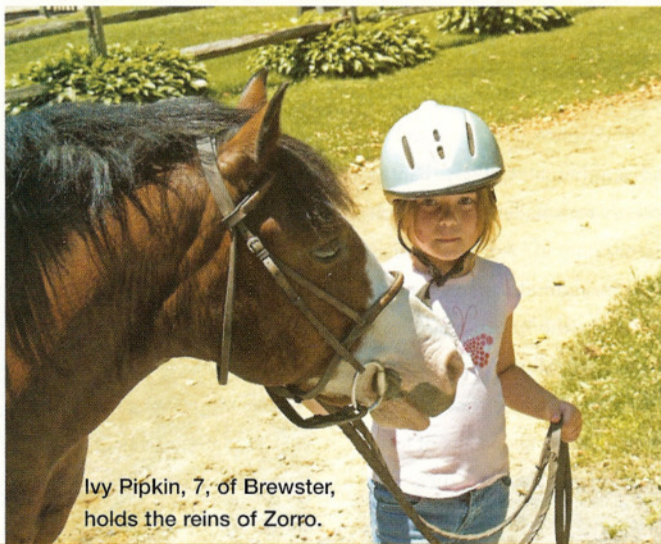
world. "Horses build self-esteem," says Reilly. "The children almost forget themselves. It teaches them a fair dose of respect, too, for the horses' strength, power, and attitude."

Woodsong Farm owner Bette Avery agrees. "I've always felt the most important thing people learn here are life skills, not riding. We do turn out some excellent riders, but the self-confidence, organizational skills, and independent thinking required for riding help them with so many other tasks in life."

Eleven-year-old Johanna Slevin of Yarmouthport heard about City to Saddle from Big Brothers Big Sisters. She was eager to try something that, aside from one trail ride, she had only read about. Now she says enthusiastically, "It was really fun. I'm not scared of horses anymore. I wish it was longer."

City to Saddle also provides a valuable experience to children like Ivy Pipkin, a seven-year-old from Brewster, who was familiar with horses but hadn't had the chance to learn equestrian skills. "Riding horses is special because I don't get to do it very much," Ivy says.

"There are so many bad things kids can get into these days," says Avery. "There's no better place than being with horses."—Susan Spencer



Ivy Pipkin, 7, of Brewster, holds the reins of Zorro.

City to Saddle: www.citytosaddle.org