

Volunteer Edmonton

Little horses, big smiles

Special to the Examiner

As Mo, Roxy, Rocky and Cheeco wait for the elevator at the Norwood Capital Health facility, they are waylaid by surprised people, some with walkers, some in wheelchairs, some walking slowly, but all with oohs and aahs and smiles on their faces.

Mo, Roxy, Rocky and Cheeco are miniature horses and, while some are veterans at visiting

seniors and sick children, others, like Cheeco, are on their first outings.

Another veteran of these trips is 12-year-old Darian Martens. The Grade 7 honour student at Foultanvale school has been part of the Hearts and Hooves organization for nearly two years.

When the horses make their way onto the elevator and travel to the third floor, Darian leads Rocky, her favourite, through the hallways.

She stops at the door of an elderly woman and knocks. "Would you like to see a pony?" she asks.

'I THOUGHT I WAS SEEING THINGS'

The woman is a little taken aback. "I thought I was seeing things," she laughs.

Darian leads Rocky into the room and is soon engaged in a conversation with the elderly woman. In a few minutes, Darian has found out that this woman used to ride horses.

Says Michelle Kropp, president and founder of the only chapter of Hearts and Hooves in Canada: "It has been great watching her (Darian) grow in confidence, her ability to talk to people."

There are more than 60 volunteers with Hearts and Hooves.

"Horses are a big draw for kids," says Kropp. "Everybody loves horses and, when kids get involved, the whole family gets involved."

Darian's family is no exception. Through Darian's leadership, her 16-year-old sister Jessica, mom Shalyne and both sets of grandparents often come out to the recreation building owned by Hearts and Hooves in order to help out.

The majority of the minis who make their home at the Hearts and Hooves farm near Sherwood Park are horses that have been rescued, most of them from neglect.

In 2004, Kropp, a special needs teacher who does early intervention at Ardrossan elementary school, made the trip to Texas to find out more about the organization.

To help the horses feel comfortable in the presence of people, volunteers like Darian spend time on the farm making them feel comfortable. Darian spends six or seven hours a week.

'THEY'RE MY LIFE'

"I can't get enough of horses. They're my life," she says. Her family owns 11 full-size horses. She started riding when she was five years old and has been showing horses for the past three years.

Darian got involved with Hearts and Hooves after her grandparents showed her an ad in the newspaper.

"I like helping people out," she says. "What's even more important is how these people in the hospital feel. It's a great experience."

For more information on Hearts and Hooves, check out www.heartsandhooves.org.

For more information about Volunteer Edmonton, contact Evelyn Pham, at epham@volunteeredmonton.com, call 780-732-6655 or check out our website at volunteeredmonton.com.

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