

Horse Sense

by [Mike Newhall](#)

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First he brushes her off so she's nice and relaxed. Then he puts on the saddle--shiny and clean, the brown leather polished. He eases the bridle slowly over her head and down her neck. He gently braids her tail, wraps it and tapes it up.

"There," he says. "Wasn't that easy?" He offers her a reassuring pat on the side. "Now we're all set to go riding."

Kareem Rosser--all 85 pounds or so of him--is grooming his horse. Well not exactly *his* horse. Ten-year-olds in his West Philadelphia neighborhood don't own horses. They can't afford to even *dream* of owning horses--not with drugs and gunfire right outside.

But Kareem is lucky. A few days a week he can escape his crumbling block at 42nd and Viola streets for the Chamounix Stables in Fairmount Park, where he goes riding. The fifth grader is a member of Work to Ride, a small, unique nonprofit that teaches inner-city Philly kids how to care for and ride horses. The children also learn polo, a game usually reserved for the privileged.

It's a cold and blustery Tuesday afternoon. Kareem and the other eight Work to Ride kids are at the Valley Forge Military Academy preparing for a weekly practice session with the school's polo squad.

The horses are groomed and ready. With a few minutes to spare, the boys and girls of Work to Ride stand in the stable's walkway, joking with the Valley Forge squad.

Kareem is especially jubilant. Today was report card day at school, and by the skin of his teeth he earned the C average he needs to be eligible for Work to Ride.

"I'll go to high school on a polo scholarship," he confidently predicts, which is believable considering that even at his young age Kareem is an especially strong player.

"Then college and the pros," he continues, adding that some day he'll be a "10-goal player," the highest rank a professional polo player can attain.

Raymond "Rico" Munson is from North Philly. Standing alongside Kareem, he offers an affectionate laugh at his teammate's predictions.

Rico, 17, has been playing polo with Work to Ride for nearly three years and is a standout player. A senior at the Community Academy of Philadelphia High School, he's trying to decide between Valley Forge College or Skidmore College in New York. Both have offered him scholarships to play polo. He's leaning toward Valley Forge.

"We're all so tight," he says looking around the room. "We're like a family."

Lezlie Hiner, 46, the "mother" and founder of Work to Ride, stands on the sidelines of Valley Forge's indoor polo arena as Kareem and the others race up and down the field on horseback. A California native who grew up around horses, Hiner bellows out instructions in a rough-hewn voice.

She founded Work to Ride nearly 10 years ago, and having no children of her own, she dedicates an average of 90 hours a week to the program--teaching riding, getting the kids to and from practice and helping them with their homework.

In return, the kids must spend a few hours each week doing chores at the Chamounix Stables--cleaning stalls, changing feed and turning the horses out for exercise. In exchange for their work, the kids earn the right to ride and play.

They compete in the national interscholastic polo division, and regularly play teams representing Yale, Cornell and the University of Connecticut. Last year their record was 6-4, and the team nearly made the nationals.

Hiner is proud of the team's accomplishments, but she's happiest about keeping the kids off the streets.

"When the kids are at the barn they can lower their street antennae and just be kids," she says. "They don't have to look over their shoulders and worry."

Although the barn has become a second home to many of the kids, they do eventually have to return to their neighborhoods. This past October 14-year-old Mecca Liles-Harris, a starter on the polo team, was murdered, along with her mother and mother's boyfriend, in her West Philadelphia home. The crime remains unsolved.

The news hit Kareem especially hard. Mecca was like a sister to him. He still has nightmares about his friend's death.

When Hiner, one of the last to see Mecca alive, learned about the killing, she took the rest of the kids up to Valley Forge to tell a former member of the team who has since received a scholarship to play for the military academy.

"He gave me a big hug and started crying," Hiner recalls, "and told me to that I

had to keep working to get these kids outta Philly."

In mid-November, the Fairmount Park Commission told Hiner that her lease of the Chamounix Stables would be terminated. For a decade the Fairmount Park Commission has leased her the property for a dollar a year.

In return for maintaining the stables and for running the park's horseback riding summer camps, Hiner could use the stables for her kids.

But things have changed. The park wants to make space for paying tenants who can provide some income.

They promised Hiner that the termination wouldn't force the kids out. They promised to build an extension to handle all the new tenants so the kids will still have a place to come and ride. They promised a lot, says Hiner, but they have yet to explain how everyone will be accommodated.

Dennis Waller, deputy director of business administration for Fairmount Park, says the park is in the process of planning the stable's additions but stresses that Hiner will have to restructure the Work to Ride program so it can service more children and become a more efficient "income generating source."

Maybe in a perfect world, says Hiner. Fundraising and foundation grants hardly cover the program's present costs--about \$140,000 a year--and besides, she asks, how will she tend to more kids with less stable space?

"Something's going down, and it's all very secretive," she says after practice while driving the kids back to the reality of their neighborhoods.

"I want to know for sure that this program is safe and secure," she says. "But I'm not getting any concrete answers. Me and the kids, we'd all feel a little better if we had some answers."

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