

Still Riding High

Despite a lack of local support, the Work to Ride program continues to teach kids how to ride horses and play polo. Now, it has its own racehorse to, hopefully, generate income.

By David Aldridge
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For years, the young people in Leslie Hiner's Work to Ride program have worked with horses in order to navigate the mysterious world of polo.

Now they're going to be owners.

Hiner got the word last week that a 3-year-old racehorse named High Spirited had been donated to her Chamounix Equestrian Center in Fairmount Park, where Hiner and her staff have been teaching kids how to ride and play polo for 12 years. Whatever High Spirited earns on the track will go to the program.

"We'll probably race him out at Penn National," Hiner said. "He's not any jet-setter or anything."

That could describe both the gritty Hiner and her program, which is still going into some of North and West Philadelphia's toughest neighborhoods and plucking out kids with different dreams. If they keep a C average in school and help out at Chamounix, they get to play polo against other middle and high schoolers around the country.

You've probably heard of Work to Ride, which was featured twice on HBO's *Real Sports* and in a lengthy feature in *Sports Illustrated* in 2004. And Hiner has received plenty of national awards.

But locally, Work to Ride hasn't been fast-tracked by anyone in a position to help, from the school district to the Fairmount Park Commission.

This should be simple. Hiner has the desire. She has the facility. And the kids, numbering in the hundreds since Hiner started Work to Ride in 1994, have the interest.

What neither has is a lot of money. Nor, would it appear, does Hiner have the kind of support in the community that she, and the program, might have earned by now. Getting these children into scholastic polo programs makes a big difference to their world view and their futures.

But there is still resistance.

"We have people in our city government that say - people on both sides, white and black - 'Why is that white lady teaching black kids polo?' " the 49-year-old Hiner said.

"I mean, nobody put any names to it... I've heard that several times. No names attached. That comes from people involved with Fairmount Park, and that comes from people in the city, from state senators to Council people on down. They don't get it. You're helping kids. What's the brain surgery involved with that?"

The kids don't care that they're playing in a mostly white sport. Why should anyone else?

Sure, horses are expensive. It costs about \$45,000 a year to feed and maintain her stable of 30. And it costs \$8,000 to \$10,000 a year to keep each child in the program.

It's cheaper to field basketball teams. And there's nothing wrong with basketball teams. But these kids love horses, not hoops.

"It's fun," said 11-year-old Daymar Rosser, one of four siblings who has come through the program. "And you get to go fast. You go fast and you get to hit the ball. You get to bump other people and go all over the place to play."

A few public figures have helped. Hiner said Michael Nutter, a City Councilman and mayoral candidate, has lent a hand, as has State Sen. Anthony Williams (D., Phila.), who hopes to forge a more formal relationship between Work to Ride and the school district.

"I came to know her watching *Real Sports*," Williams said by telephone. "It was halfway through the program that I realized this was in Philadelphia. I was shocked, and I was a little annoyed. Because we're basically doing body counts here."

Williams felt a special kinship with the Work to Ride children, having learned to ride at age 10. And his life was changed by a similar intervention - when his parents found a way to get him into the Quakers' Westtown School in West Chester.

"All the kids in that program are rare," Williams said. "Those kids deserve special concern and support because they have special needs."

Hiner has been trying to secure a long-term lease for the land in Fairmount Park so that Work to Ride can build an indoor facility. That would allow it to train riders year-round and raise revenue from the riding lessons that the program offers from April through the fall.

Mark Focht, executive director of Fairmount Park, said by phone last week that "we're very amenable" to negotiating such a lease and that he hoped to make that happen soon.

Hiner's heard "soon" for a long time, but she keeps putting kids in stirrups.

"At first, it was just 'get 'em through high school,' " Hiner said. "Now it's become, 'get 'em through high school; get 'em into college.' And the scholastic polo, that's what gets them going and gets them interested. When they go to places like Yale and they see the campus and they meet all these people, it just kind of lays a nice little foundation."

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