



Lend a Hoof

Horse SenseAbility at Wildstar Farm

by Kara Noble

Polly Kornblith never expected to have a career in equine therapy. She didn't plan to build a Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) certified equestrian center in Sherborn after she retired from a decades-long career in education. Her retirement goals did not include establishing a nonprofit called Wildstar Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapy or developing a roster of equine therapy programs

decided to combine her educational experience with her love of animals. She and her Labrador retriever, Dylan, became a certified pet therapy team. One of many places they visited together was a school for troubled teenage boys affiliated with the Home for Little Wanderers in Walpole.

"The boys were high-school age and most had abuse, neglect, and violence in their backgrounds," Polly says. "They were very troubled. I'd come

Hugo, a Shetland trained to work indoors. Polly and Hugo soon became weekly visitors in local elementary school classrooms.

Wildstar Farm Is Born

In 2016, Polly and Mike also found a farm in Sherborn with the potential to be the home of their new equine facility.

"The property was in rough shape when they bought it," says Barbara Hagan, a businesswoman who now



called Horse SenseAbility for young people with emotional scars.

But now that she's done all those things, equine therapy has become her retirement labor of love.

Polly earned her master's degree in education from Harvard in 1982. Between 1992 and 2016, she ran her own business, Kudos Concepts, developing online learning programs for clients ranging from the United Nations and the Federal Aviation Administration to Cornell University.

Polly did plan to return to horses and riding when she retired. At age 49, she purchased her first horse, an off-the-track Thoroughbred mare. Her husband, Mike Newman, also got a horse, and he began riding with the Norfolk Hunt Club in Medfield. The couple became so serious about horses that they began to consider building their own equine facility.

As retirement approached, Polly

into their locked classrooms with my dog and see those burly, macho, street-smart boys lie on the floor stroking the dog, whispering in his ear, allowing themselves to be physically close and emotionally vulnerable. The impact on them was remarkable."

When the school in Walpole hired an occupational therapist certified by PATH, Polly found an opportunity to try equine therapy. She and the new occupational therapist developed and piloted a summer horsemanship program at the school.

That experience made equine therapy Polly's new passion. In 2016 and 2017, she earned two PATH certifications, one as an equine specialist in mental health and learning and a second as a therapeutic riding instructor.

She contacted Personal Ponies, which loans out specially bred Shetland ponies to families of children with special needs. They introduced her to

serves on the Horse SenseAbility board of directors. "It only had a four-stall barn. Everything needed a lot of work. But Polly and Mike are doers. They look beyond problems."

Soon after they bought the property, which they now call Wildstar Farm, Polly got a crazy idea. "I realized I was getting certified," she says. "I was building a facility. I had horses that were therapy suitable. Why not start my own PATH center?" She and Mike decided to go for it.

They adapted the design of their equine facility to make it compliant with PATH and Americans with Disabilities Act requirements. Polly brought together a board of directors and an advisory council that included top PATH specialists, legal experts, educators, and business and technology professionals to help her develop programs and a business model.

On September 15, 2017, she applied

for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status for Wildstar Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapy and its Horse SenseAbility programs.

Polly made two firm decisions at the outset. The first was that the health and happiness of the horses had to come first. "If the horses aren't happy, we'll stop doing this," she says.

Second, she elected to focus on services for young people who had experienced trauma, including children in state custody/foster care; youths facing mental health challenges; kids growing up in stressful economic circumstances; and individuals on the autism spectrum.

HorseSenseAbility: Putting It All Together

With construction of the facility underway and a clear mission in mind, Polly designed features and programs.

The Discovery Trail

The Discovery Trail, a subtly fenced outdoor learning environment with constructed activity stations, would give participants a chance to work with horses (mounted or unmounted) in nature while developing physical skills, confidence, and independence. Lowe's Home Improvement donated the materials for the Discovery Trail, and a team of volunteers from the Lowe's Heroes community service program built the activity stations in two days.

Stable Moments

Polly chose the Stable Moments program to serve young people who have experienced foster care. Pioneered by Georgia social worker and horsewoman Rebecca Miller, Stable Moments brings a child together with a horse and a trained volunteer mentor. The three meet weekly throughout an entire school year for unmounted, horse-related activities.

Consistency is critical to the success of Stable Moments. Polly insists that volunteer mentors complete comprehensive training and understand the commitment required before accepting them into the program.

"These kids have had so many people come and go in their lives," says Polly. "One participant had been in eleven different foster homes by the time she was five years old. That kind of disruption has a profound emotional impact. It can affect brain development."

City to Saddle

The City to Saddle program was founded by Massachusetts horsewomen Barbara Zenker and Kim Summers in 2003. It brings children ages six to thirteen from underserved urban communities to the farm during the summer. In each of the program's four, week-long sessions at Horse SenseAbility, six eligible children spend half days riding, learning horsemanship, playing games, making crafts, and enjoying rural life. Extensive fundraising and generous sponsors cover most of the operating costs. Each participant in Horse SenseAbility's version of City to Saddle pays only \$15.

City to Saddle's 2019 sessions were filled 48 hours after Polly sent the email announcing the program dates. The impact on participants makes it clear why it is so popular.

"One boy who came during 2018 had never seen a real horse, only ones on television and in videos," Polly says. "He was petrified. On his first day, it took everything we had to coax him to even sit on a horse. By Friday, with a volunteer leading his horse, the boy trotted around the arena with a big smile on his face."

Wildstar Wranglers

Wildstar Wranglers serves young people on the autism spectrum who are transitioning from school to adulthood and hopefully employment. Participants develop basic skills necessary for any kind of job by working at the farm under the supervision of staff and adult volunteers. "We teach them about navigating job interviews, arriving on time, dressing appropriately, following instructions, checking their work, receiving feedback, asking for help, and offering help," Polly says. Horse SenseAbility will also provide references for participants who successfully complete the program.

Eighteen-year-old Andie has gained valuable experience and confidence since he joined the Wranglers program this spring. He loves working with the horses, recognizing their individual personalities, and understanding the dynamics as they interact. He's proud of his ability to calm and handle horses in his care. "A horse does not have to come to you. Every time I greet a horse, he's being challenged by choice," Andie says. "It's a huge accomplishment when

a horse trusts you enough to come to you. It's empowering to know a fifteen-hundred-pound animal trusts me and enjoys being around me."


Looking Ahead

In 2019, Polly hopes to pilot Reading, Writing & Riding, a new program she's developing in collaboration with the Framingham school system. If they can secure funding and iron out the details, fourth and fifth graders will come to Wildstar Farm each week during the school year for riding lessons and tutoring in reading and writing. And, if donations support it, Polly hopes to send each participant home with a 10–20 book mini-library.

Polly and Mike have been able to accomplish so much in such a short time in part due to a cadre of volunteers not only from surrounding communities, but also from across the U.S. (via phone and internet). "Our volunteers range from lifelong horse people to mental health professionals, from educators to computer experts, and from animal trainers to parents," Polly says. "They're incredible."

In less than two years, the couple has built a state-of-the-art equine-learning facility with a professional staff and an impressive roster of certified instructors. They serve 75 to 100 participants on the farm and hundreds more in schools and facilities throughout the Sherborn-Framingham area.

Why are Polly and Mike working so hard in their retirement? Because of children like the young boy with autism Polly met when she brought Hugo to a nearby preschool. When it was his turn, the boy and his aide approached Hugo, and he patted the pony. As they walked away, he said, "Horse." Polly saw his teacher silently going wild across the room.

"It was the first word he had ever spoken at school," says Polly. "That single word showed them he understood what was happening and he was learning. That's what this is all about." 

Want to lend a hoof? To learn more and to purchase tickets for the October 26 fund-raising concert with Will Dailey, visit horsesenseability.org.

Kara Noble has an Icelandic mare and a pair of mini donkeys at her farm in Montgomery and has ridden for most of her life. She's a professional writer and editor and holds an MFA in creative nonfiction.