

The New York Times

THE NEEDIEST CASES

January 5, 2012

Retired, but Overcoming Her Pain to Help Disabled Children Ride, and Walk, Tall

By Mathew R. Warren



Julie Glassberg for The New York Times

Mary Anderson, a retired nurse, has been volunteering for two years at the New York Therapeutic Riding Center at the Chateau Stables on West 48th Street, where she works with children.

Mary Anderson tugged on the strap of Kiarra Boodram's helmet, making sure it was secure, then pushed Kiarra's wheelchair up to Hot Diggity, a white pony three and a half feet tall with gray and black patches.

Kiarra, 7, who has cerebral palsy, stood up from her wheelchair, scaled three pink steps and mounted Hot Diggity's saddle with the help of Ms. Anderson and two other volunteers. Holding the reins, she sat up straight, her long braided ponytail running down her back, her feet in the stirrups and a determined look on her face. Then Ms. Anderson began leading the pony at a brisk pace in circles and figure 8s around the 1,600-square-foot dirt arena.

"I can hardly walk to the bus stop at the end of the day, but I love working with the kids," said Ms. Anderson, a retired nurse who has bright red curly hair and has been volunteering at the [New York Therapeutic Riding Center](#) for two years. "I'm getting something out of it, too."

Every Saturday morning, Ms. Anderson, 64, makes her way from her apartment in Washington Heights to the Chateau Stables on West 48th Street. She helps prepare the space, which the stable donates, along with the animals, for the children who will ride that day. She picks out the appropriate helmets, and grooms and saddles the horses before the children arrive at 1 p.m., each one getting a 45-minute ride on a full-size horse, a pony or a miniature horse.

For the children, who have disabilities like impaired mobility, autism and blindness, and who often come to the center at the recommendation of their doctors, the horses provide a form of therapy. Kiarra, who has been coming to the center for the past year and once primarily used a wheelchair, now regularly walks with the aid of crutches or a walker.

“She was afraid to walk,” Kiarra’s mother, Virginia Cabrera, said, as she watched her ride. “This taught her balance; this made her more confident, and now she doesn’t even want to sit in her chair.”

The center depends on the help of volunteers, particularly those like Ms. Anderson, whose 40-year background as a nurse is a huge benefit.

“That wealth of experience Mary has in the health field is a tremendous asset to us,” said Richard Brodie, the center’s founder and president.

Ms. Anderson was raised in a small town in the Adirondacks, she said, “where they had chickens, not horses.” Pain in her knees forced her to retire as an assistant head nurse of the psychiatric unit at St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital Center in 2007. But after two knee replacements and operations on both feet, she wanted to get back to helping people.

“I didn’t want to be a couch potato; that was not my line of thinking,” Ms. Anderson said.

At a health fair, she learned about the retired senior volunteer program run by the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Through the program, Ms. Anderson was connected with the riding center. Since 2009, she has made volunteering a full-time job, also working during the week with the [YUM Fresh Food](#) program, which offers affordable fresh fruits and vegetables to the community. Ms. Anderson packages orders, manages distribution and markets the program.

Though she walks with a slight limp and has pain in her knees as well as in her feet and hips, Ms. Anderson says her volunteer work is too important to let her ailments slow her down.

“I just put my mind to it because they need me,” she said. “I take some Motrin or whatever and I keep on trucking.”

Ms. Anderson receives a monthly pension and \$1,668 in [Social Security](#) benefits but is not yet eligible for [Medicare](#), so she pays \$1,300 a month out of pocket for health insurance. She also pays \$816.35 a month in rent. She helps support her 5-year-old grandson and 36-year-old daughter, a single mother who earns \$8 an hour working as a porter, Ms. Anderson said. On average, Ms. Anderson said, she gives her daughter \$520 to \$750 a month to pay for food, bills and the cost of a baby sitter.

Since November 2009, Ms. Anderson has received a total of \$141 from the [Neediest Cases](#) Fund in reimbursements for travel to the stable.

“When I get that reimbursement, I can buy another MetroCard and keep doing what I’m doing,” she said.

As Kiarra finished her ride, Ms. Anderson helped her dismount and removed her helmet. Holding the hand of a volunteer, Kiarra walked toward her mother.

“Walk tall!” Ms. Cabrera said proudly.

Ms. Anderson said: “I go home from here and I feel I’ve made a real contribution to helping the kids and their families. It’s a really good feeling.”