



Student Profile: Annika's Journey with FFT

Our mission is to enhance the lives of children and young adults facing extraordinary cognitive, emotional, social and physical challenges through the therapeutic benefits of horse back riding and unmounted activities.

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Annika Marie, or Annika as she prefers to be called, had a family connection to therapeutic horseback riding long before her birth. Her great-grandmother was an avid equestrian and owned a horse farm in Orange County, NY. As her great-grandmother aged and became unable to ride, she donated her beloved horses to a therapeutic riding program.

We first met Annika and her parents, Jay and Katrina in the spring of 2015. Annika was a shy 10-year-old struggling to make connections with her peers because of her inability to read non-verbal cues. At a young age, Annika was diagnosed with Stargardt Disease, also known as juvenile macular degeneration. The disease causes progressive damage of the macula, the small area in the center of the retina that is responsible for sharp, straight-ahead vision. As Annika describes it, "I cannot see out of the middle of my eyes, but I can see out of the sides." After a visit to the farm to meet Lucy and our herd, Annika's love of horses shined brightly. She and her parents felt that Pony Partners was the right place for Annika to explore her interest in horses. Within a couple of weeks into the program, she found common bonds among her fellow horse-loving classmates and friendships began to form.

The following winter, Annika continued with us and began riding in our Therapeutic Horseback Riding program. In the past where she struggled in large peer group activities, she flourished in the sport of riding with her equine partner. Neither of her parents expected to see how Annika adapted; over time her other senses: hearing, scent and touch begin to dominate where her sight lacked. She could understand what the horses were feeling based on the



Annika & Mac

tone of their snickers. When riding, she relied more on her sense of touch; her legs pushed the horse forward, then her hands directed the horse where to go. She trusted the horse to see where she couldn't. The vastness of the indoor arena gave her breath and depth to move about in comfort and the voice of her guiding instructor, Allie, gave her confidence to stretch outside her comfort zone. Each week her riding skills improved. Even, the smell of hay was a welcomed weekly experience. She would enter the barn, close her eyes, inhale deeply, and welcome the scent of hay and horses with a smile.

As Annika's riding has grown, so have her goals. This past spring she announced to her instructor, Allie, she wanted to advance her riding to cantering and jumping. We were thrilled to hear Annika's riding aspirations, however, that meant she would leave us to join a program that offers advanced instruction.

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Founded in 1994



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Dear Friends,

September always is a time of reflection for me. I marvel at how quickly the beginning of the school year arrives and how our children mature and grow. The way the light changes is always the most dramatic signal of the year's passing for me, far more-so than the ringing in of the stroke of midnight ending on December 31st. As the Friends For Tomorrow (FFT) students flow back in during the first week of September, the changes we see in them can be equally remarkable. Summer always seems to be a time of prolific physical growth; often the more subtle changes in confidence, in courage, in ease with others are reflected in a powerful way.

We generally see our students week after week throughout the year. A well-deserved break for our horses during the month of August offers a natural hiatus. For some families, summer break is extended into July too, as they attend camp or other summer activities. We hear several times a day that first week of September "We couldn't wait to come back!" or "Yay! My favorite day of the week!". Those refrains will never age, they are the highest compliments to our staff and volunteers. The hugs and greetings they exchanged are even better – even parents and siblings are in on the celebration!

Captured equally that week are the visible, audible and perceived signs of release and calm as our students return, or are being introduced to, a place they can be themselves; no pressure, no expectations, no demands – we welcome the individuality, struggle and unique potential of each. Difficulties in school, and sometimes just a daily routine, can create overwhelming feelings of anxiety or introversion - FFT offers a gentle space to step into. Bodies soften, eyes widen, breath deepens. Through your involvement and interest, you help us bring this sense of ease to all our students and their families, and even to the volunteers and staff; we breathe a collective sigh of harmony as we share the afternoon.

This past year, we have collectively accomplished a great deal, and more to come this fall! Our student base is strong, with our program at full capacity. Several of our students, after many great years, are "graduating"! They will move on to programs that offer more advanced riding activities, or larger horses as our students grow taller and their skills strengthen. We have welcomed new horses into our herd, which enhances training opportunities for staff and equines alike. We have established funding partnerships and successfully been awarded grant money. Our outreach in community service opportunities has piqued the interest of many new young volunteers. We are preparing for a large group of students to compete in the Special Olympics of Massachusetts (SOMA) Equestrian Show in late October. FFT will host its annual Sibling Week in November, a very special week for our families. Our students have the opportunity to invite their siblings to experience the same joy they see, as they patiently watch the growing relationships and progression of their brother or sister. Grins are doubled and tripled this week!

We are excited to embark into new possibilities this fall, with our students and our program. We are exploring new ways to enhance our program offerings, expanding our funding outreach, and creating ways to share the stories and images of FFT with our donors, our crucial support system. Keep an eye out for us in your mailbox and online... and know you have helped create every moment we share with you! With the ever-quickening arrival of fall each year, I am grateful for this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation for your involvement, and generosity in continuing this important partnership.

With warmest gratitude,

Diane

Special Olympics 2017

In years past, by the time you receive this fall issue, we would be basking in the afterglow of our students' participation in the Special Olympics Massachusetts (SOMA) Equestrian Show. The stories of the day and results would be included on this page. Unfortunately, because the games are being held in late October this year, we weren't able to make this production deadline. We can, however, tell you that we, as always, are thrilled to be taking almost half of our student body to the games. Allie and Lucy have been coaching our athletes through mock courses here at the farm for weeks leading up to the games to get each prepared.

Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt is the Athlete's Oath of the Special Olympics. And brave in the attempt is exactly what each and every one of our students are when they participate in this annual equestrian competition: at a new farm, mounted on an unfamiliar horse and under the watchful eyes of loving friends and families, and hundreds of new faces.



Eleanor and Volunteer Terri celebrate her win at last year's show.

First time competitors include Nellie, Connor, Misha and Levi. Returning athletes are Nava, Amadi, Kristen, Eleanor, Phoebe and Noam. Two of our most seasoned athletes, Annika and Kayla, will compete in the walk/trot independent class without leaders.

We will have the pleasure, and be so proud, of accompanying these brave young riders on Saturday, October 28 at Windrush Farm. This event is one of four tournaments to be held this fall across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Images captured and results of the team will be posted after Thursday, Nov. 2nd on our Facebook page, and website at www.friendsfortomorrow.org/soma.



Weed-a-pull-ooza 2017!

With gratitude, we recognize the spirit of generosity shared by more than half of the Brooks School eighth grade class in Lincoln. Saturdays, September 9th and 15th, provided the perfect weather for the class to join together for a community service opportunity here at FFT.



The lush growth of the summer gifted us with a bumper crop of a particularly tenacious and fast-growing weed. Thankfully, the enthusiastic and exuberant participation of 36 middle school students hand-pulling the unwanted vegetation opened the pastures up for the bountiful fall sunshine and rain to encourage the grass to once again grow!

For the Brooks students, the chance to catch up with friends outside of the classroom after the summer apart, the opportunity to complete two hours of community service, and eat pizza were great incentives to provide a real gift to our program! The high energy the volunteers maintained was seen and heard – laughter and lively conversations, shouts of support for a job well done and the occasional Parkour leaps and rolls in the pastures were truly entertaining!

As you may now realize, our horses are the foundation upon which FFT students rely. Being able to offer lush pasture both for the horses' relaxation and ultimate nutrition is crucial for their physical health and positive attitude. They are able to graze together as nature intended, enjoying companionship and the holistic raw food source – grass! The natural environment in the fields allows our horses to also find the feelings of safety and community our participants' experience.



Mac & Sparky enjoying the weed-free grass



The eighth-grade students are just some of the more than 80 volunteers who support our program every year. Our program could not exist without their generous gifts of time and energy. Please consider joining us as a volunteer - there are opportunities to work in the lesson program, to support fundraising efforts, and assist by joining our Board of Directors. Please contact us if you can help out, or if you know someone who would like to.



Annika in Pony Partners in 2015

Annika's Journey with FFT Continued...

We wish we could keep every student we teach under our "wings" forever, but we realize, with pride, that we have done our work; we have fostered growth, confidence and skills, and we sometimes must let our students move to the next phase of their riding journey. "She has great skills and knowledge on horseback and only needs to be encouraged to believe in herself and her horse. She has worked hard to increase her riding independence and is now trotting off lead around the ring. I am very proud of all of the work she has put in and how she has overcome any challenge that has been presented to her. We will be sad to see her graduate but excited to hear about new riding adventures!", said Allie.

Warm & Fuzzy: Inspiring A Young Donor

We wanted to share with you the story of one of our special donors. Meet Violet, a 7-year-old from Medfield, who was so inspired by her love of riding at Saddle Rowe in Medway that she wanted to find a way to give back to an organization that helps other children ride. For the past two years she donated her Christmas money to FFT in honor of her school teachers and riding instructors. We think that it is just wonderful that Violet chose to think of others and how she could help. Violet reports that she adores riding 3 days a week on Charlie and Foxy, and that she loves the community of friends at her barn. She came to visit FFT this summer and got to meet some of our beloved horses as well. Thank you, Violet, (and family) for your generosity!



Mac & Violet during her visit to the farm



Violet on Foxy at a show

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CONTRIBUTE TO THE CARE OF OUR HERD: Make a targeted gift or contribute to the equipment or care needed that keeps our horses happy and healthy.

OUTFIT OUR STUDENTS: Helmets and gloves are always appreciated by our students! These we purchase according to our student needs. Donations of gently used boots and other riding gear helps outfit our riders for show and daily riding activities.

VOLUNTEER: Volunteers must be 14 years old, have transportation, and be willing to commit to a regularly scheduled afternoon on a consistent basis.
