

St. S. Sullivan

Dragon Slayers Learn Responsibility and the Importance of Giving

EDITOR'S NOTE: Eileen Szychowski, longtime Dragon Slayer and accomplished equestrian who earned a degree in psychology from UCSC, writes of her experience with the program for handicapped children and adults provided by Josef Rivers.

By ELIEEN SZYCHOWSKI

River's Crest Dragon Slayers is a many faceted program. Its aim is to provide physical therapy to its students through equitation, teaching them to slay their personal dragons along the way.

Each Dragon Slayer is physically handicapped in some way. They must commit themselves to a rigorous, individualized program and through this develop their physical strength and self-esteem through horseback riding. Students also are educated in grooming, stable management, equine anatomy and maintenance of horse and tack. These features are equally as important as the actual riding, for they inspire a sense of responsibility and accomplishment.

But perhaps the most enduring and pervasive lesson we learn at River's Crest stables is best expressed in the words of St. Francis: "for in giving we receive."

For most of us the act of receiving comes quickly and effortlessly. It's the act of giving that seems to require a little work. Learning to give and share are prerequisites to a healthy adult life. This is especial crucial for the disabled child who expects to become productive and a fully participating member in our society.

Having been disabled as a child, I can remember the well meaning efforts of relatives and other adults who wanted to do everything for me and give me everything. How I appreciate the ones who made me struggle to do things for myself!

Josef Rivers, director and instructor of the Dragon Slayers, has many creative ways of introducing the concept of giving to his students. Like a fabric carefully woven, he selects his design and continually pursues it.

First he teaches by example. Everyone who becomes a Dragon Slayer receives love and soon learns to give it. Josef requires that each of us assume responsibility for ourselves. All students, regardless of age or disability, must assume responsibility for attendance, punctuality and homework assignments.

For many, this is the first time anything has been expected of them. Consequently there may be some initial resistance from new recruits. But it's only a matter of time before a new-found sense of self-respect and dignity becomes evident. Commitment is one way that Josef teaches his students that in order to receive respect, we must give it.

Finally, each of us must care for something other than ourselves such as our horse. None are permitted to turn a horse back into the corral after a lesson without giving proper grooming and a rubdown. A wheelchair-bound person may become very accustomed to being served and waited upon. Grooming and caring for the



Dragon Slayers have adopted donkey, Jonquil, cared for in the Lockwood Home of Rest for Old and Sick Donkeys in England. Jackie Fisher, friend of the Dragon Slayers, was in England to visit her mother and posed with Jonquil and unidentified goose. Each Dragon Slayer did chores to earn a portion of the adoption fee which goes toward food and vet services. This is just one more way in which Josef Rivers teaches the importance of assuming responsibility and learn to give.

needs of one's horse can all be done from a wheelchair. This is often the first time some of our students perceive themselves as someone with something to offer — a service to give.

Josef has experienced remarkable success in using animals to teach the importance of assuming responsibility and learning to give. His latest method involves an adopt-a-donkey program in England. The Lockwood Home of Rest for Old and Sick Donkeys sends a certificate of adoption and regular newsletters updating us on the life of Jonquil, the Dragon Slayers' adopted donkey.

The younger children, especially, feel a sense of pride recounting the

chores they perform to earn their \$2 share of the adoption fee. Miniscule as it may seem, this \$2 sponsorship which goes toward food and vet services for Jonquil, teaches the young children what it means to be a contributor. They all feel important lending support to someone less fortunate than themselves.

It seems to be commonly overlooked that disabled children do grow up. They become adults like other children. This is one reason Josef threads this theme of giving throughout each student's program.

The result is that each of us has come to understand that there is dignity in giving.