

# KART show makes a difference in riders' lives

By **ABBY WARGO**  
Student Intern

**STILL POND** — The show ring at Worthmore Equestrian Center was quiet as riders waited on horseback for instructor Marco Belperio to give them directions.

"You tell your horse what to do," he said. "You are capable. You are independent."

The five riders then led their horses in a circle, following Belperio's instructions to stop, move on or change to a different riding position.

All told, 45 riders showcased their equitation skills to their parents and teachers during the Kent Association of Riding Therapy's annual horse show May 22.

The show is the last of the school year for the participants, who vary in age from elementary school to adulthood.

Founded in 1984 and, according to Belperio, going strong ever since, KART is a nonprofit dedicated to helping children and adults with special needs bolster their social and developmental growth. According to its website, "KART uses a multi-faceted program involving therapeutic horseback riding, grooming and caring for the horse, and comprehensive classroom instruction."

KART President Renee Bench said, "It's amazing how it actually works — you see the smiles, they're so happy."

Bench has been president of the board for three years. Prior to that, she volunteered with the program for a year.

"I grew up riding horses. ... I came out one time, and I've been hooked ever since," she said. "Seeing the kids just melts your heart."

The program is free for Kent County Public Schools students who receive special education services or have individualized learning programs. KCPS provides transportation one day a week for students, who visit Worthmore Equestrian Cen-



Gabriel Stone on Micah listens to directions from instructor Marco Belperio during the trail ride portion of the show.



Kaeleb Zornak poses with Nora after the show.

ter eight times per semester. There are also students from Chestertown Christian Academy as well as private riders.

Isaiah Dodd has been participating in KART for about 10 years. He began when he was in high school and loved it, so he has continued to ride.

"I wanted to have fun, participate, hang out and meet new people. I want to support all the people that are trying something new," Dodd said.

Plus, Dodd loves the horses. "I like to ride them and become friends with them," he said. Micah and Nova are his two favorites.

"We're best friends. He's always happy to see me," Dodd said of Micah.

The show has two classes. There's equitation, where riders demonstrate their balance and posture as well

as other basic riding skills such as asking their horses to circle, walk on, stop or even trot. The second class is an indoor trail ride, which requires riders' coordination and an ability to navigate the horse through obstacles like barrels, poles and cones.

"The trail ride demonstrates how to go from one difficulty to another, and how to manage tasks," Belperio said.

According to Bench, KART has had many success stories from its riders.

"We've really seen kids go from lying down on a horse to riding independently. There's a good number of successes, and the kids notice a difference," she said. "I've seen kids that are non-verbal talk. They'll talk to a horse."

Belperio has been with KART since 1996 and has



Avie Profitt guides her horse Leo over an obstacle during the trail ride.

PHOTOS BY ABBY WARGO

been a Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International-certified riding instructor since 2001. He said the program is very effective.

"When students arrive at the farm, they haven't always ridden a horse before. They're total beginners," he said. Some students take some convincing to ride, but once they do, the benefits are obvious.

The rocking motion of a horse's walking is beneficial for riders with special needs, Bench and Belperio said. The movement is soothing and calming and engages different muscles, like the hips, that helps some riders who have less motor function.

Even for riders who are unable to walk, they can still ride a horse, and the action of doing so strengthens their core, hips and back muscles, Belperio said.

Lesson by lesson, the riders improve, and eventually some go from needing a lot of assistance to trotting on their own. Belperio said riders exhibit physical, behav-

ioral and emotional improvement during their time with the program.

"It's a tangible and measurable improvement. It's fascinating to witness. It's confidence and self-esteem boosting, and it helps them collect life skills," Belperio said.

The skills learned through the KART experience also are transferable to other aspects of life. Belperio said riding shows the students they are capable of doing things, which allows them to learn new skills and gain more independence in their daily life.

"They really love what they're doing. Riding is a strong motivator. The cause and effect is very strong. They learn that they are able to control and manage their behavior," Belperio said.

Others agree.

"The kids pay attention to Marco on the horses. I'm a believer," said Ann Murray. She is vice president of the KART board, chairman of the horse show and a volunteer.

More than 40 volunteers

help out at the show and throughout the year.

Bench and Belperio both said KART is extremely lucky to have so many dedicated volunteers.

"It all comes down to the volunteers, and they're ready and willing," Murray said.

Marita Wilson has been a volunteer for only one semester, but she said she has fallen in love with the program and will continue to volunteer. She came to KART for the horses, she said, but has stayed for the children.

"It's a great opportunity to build relationships with children with disabilities and to see them grow and learn. They really come alive on the horses," she said. "I'm looking forward to coming back in the fall."

Bench said KART is always looking for new volunteers. KART days at Worthmore are Wednesdays and Thursdays. For more information, visit [kentridingtherapy.org](http://kentridingtherapy.org). Email [kentridingtherapy@gmail.com](mailto:kentridingtherapy@gmail.com) if you are interested in volunteering.

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