

Riders Without Limits:

STORY BY STEPHANIE DUQUETTE • PHOTOS COURTESY OF POLLY COHEN AND VAL ALLYN

In spotless white breeches, formal black coat and tall English boots, Val Allyn was perfectly attired for her debut trip into the dressage show ring. Val's partner, a 20-year-old palomino mare named Delight, was equally polished, white mane neatly braided, golden coat glowing, patiently waiting to put her years of experience to work on her rider's behalf. Polly Cohen, Val's riding coach, delivered last minute reminders as Val prepared to ride an Introductory Level test at the Oregon Dressage Society show Mar. 23rd at the Yamhill County Fairgrounds in McMinnville, OR. There was only one tiny detail, easily overlooked, to hint that Val was any different from other riders at the show. Rubber bands, in a barrel-racer style figure-eight around her legs, prevented her feet from coming out of the stirrups: a problem caused by Val's multiple sclerosis.

Since November of 2007, Val, who lives in Depoe Bay, OR, has been riding one to two times a week at the Bright Horizon Therapeutic Riding Center in nearby Lincoln City. Polly Cohen is not only her dressage coach, but also a NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped) certified riding instructor, and executive director of the non-profit organization that helps people conquer their disabilities through riding and interacting with horses.

"We teach ages from age five all the way up to senior citizens--anything from the ADD/autism spectrum, to riders with multiple sclerosis and Down syndrome," said Cohen, 28, an experienced therapeutic

riding instructor who took the helm of Bright Horizon in July 2007. "I was asked to step in and help Bright Horizon move from a grassroots organization into a NARHA-certified therapeutic riding center," she said, adding that Val was one of the first riders to sign up for the six-week session Cohen set up last fall to test the waters of her new program.

"I actually saw an article in the local paper about therapeutic horseback riding and thought, 'that sounds really interesting,'" said Val. "Currently, with my MS, my problem is cognitive memory. Each different step that you go through—like at the horse show, I was at Introductory Level Test A—having to make the horse do that routine is really a plus to me, to strengthen my cognitive problems."

Val, 56, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at 19, during her second year of college.



Val Allyn shows off the second place ribbon she won at the Oregon Dressage Society show in March 2008.

"When it hit me, it hit me like a ton of bricks," she recalls. The chronic, progressive, incurable disease affects the body's central nervous system, causing a variety of physical and mental dysfunctions. Except for her slight limp, no one can see Val's most significant MS symptom: brain lesions that interfere when she tries to do simple

tasks like spell words, count money or remember a dressage test.

"There are times, with my memory, I have to really remember certain patterns that I'm trying to do with the horse. Polly's very good at that. She is very patient, and we repeat stuff a lot, and that's just what I have to do to get it down in my brain," said Val, who got a prescription from her doctor for the therapeutic riding program. "It's more me than the horse, because the horse is really a great horse. She's just perfect." Val and Delight were close enough to perfect at the horse show, earning a respectable 64 percent score and a ribbon for second place. The experience left Val ready to get right back in the saddle and start preparing for the next show. "I didn't realize that dressage is so very detailed! So, with practice—a lot more practice—I hope to do better," she said. "It was exciting, it was fun, and I'm anxious to do it again!"

Big Changes for Bright Horizon

To better accommodate the majority of the program's volunteers and riders, the center moved in early April from Lincoln City to a more spacious facility in Logsdon, OR, about 35 miles southeast. Only three riders at a time could ride at the Lincoln City center, while the new 100x100 arena will comfortably hold a class of five. "We try to group them in age and characteristics of their disability, so the classes are structured so that everybody can learn and grow and progress," Cohen said.

Cohen is also in the process of obtaining NARHA certification for Bright Horizon, which she said is an important credential for any therapeutic riding center. Because of the center's recent relocation, she has postponed the accreditation process until this fall. "Someone comes out from NARHA to evaluate the facility, watch the program, and when we pass, we're considered an accredited center," she said. "I wanted make sure people understood this wasn't a 'dog and pony' that had kids just walking around in the arena. There are lesson plans, structure, goals for each rider."

The Bright Horizon schedule for 2008 is a busy one: four eight-week sessions and two one-week camps. Besides Cohen, the center has two other paid employees and a nine-member volunteer board of directors. The

Bright Horizon Therapeutic Riding Center lifts people beyond their disabilities

501(c) (3) organization relies on support from donors and corporations to meet its \$73,000 annual operating budget, as well as its special equipment needs. Cohen recently applied for an America's Horse Cares grant from the American Quarter Horse Association, as well as a grant from Georgia Pacific, which will help Bright Horizon obtain a wheelchair ramp for its horse mounting structure. "Right now, we're only able to accommodate people who can walk without assistance, or just a little assistance. With this ramp, we'll be able to open our doors to everybody... people in wheelchairs or walkers, or people who need more assistance," said Cohen.

How Horses Help

Anyone who enjoys a bond with their special horse will describe how the feel of being in the saddle can relax the body, and how caring for their equine friend can uplift the spirit. For people with disabilities, these feelings translate into therapy with real medical benefits. Polly Cohen carefully matches each rider to one of the four horses in the Bright Horizon program. "Some horses are narrow built, medium built, wider built, and each horse produces a different type of movement, front to back, side to side or rotational," she explained. "If we've got a child that's Down syndrome riding a big, tall, lengthy Thoroughbred-type horse that strides nice and smooth, with that rocking chair feeling, they

tend to be a little more disengaged from the program. If we put them on a short, choppy little Quarter Horse that has concussive movement that, to some people, would be kind of uncomfortable—to that type of disability, it's always reminding the body to pay attention... it keeps them aware of where their body is on the horse. It's amazing how the change of a horse will help engage a rider in a class," she said.

A typical class session at Bright Horizon involves two types of volunteers: the leader, who has significant horse experience, and the side-walker, who stays next to the horse and helps the rider. The students are encouraged to come early and help groom, saddle and lead their horse around the arena before getting in the saddle.

"The mounting process is the time that could be the most dangerous," said Cohen.

The horse steps into a small area with a block on the right side and a platform on the left. Riders step up on



The Four Legged Therapists

The four Bright Horizons horses work a maximum of three one-hour sessions a day. Three were donated to the center, and Delight, the horse Val Allyn uses for dressage, is leased to Bright Horizons. Delight's stable mates are Star, a 20-year-old Quarter Horse/Arabian mare; Handy, a 20-year-old Quarter Horse gelding who, in his prime, was a champion rope horse; and Abby, a 20-year-old Quarter Horse mare with a short, stocky frame.

"I like to see horses who have had show experience or some sort of competitive work, because that means that they've been clipped, bathed, trailered, seen different surroundings," says Polly Cohen "Typically, I don't look for horses that have too much of a 'playful' side. We're looking for horses that are kind of stoic and content with doing their job."

the platform and, with as much assistance they need, mount the horse. Tack is adjusted, the rider cues the horse to step forward using voice or touch, and when all the riders are aboard, Cohen begins her lesson plan for the day.

"Maybe it's weaving through the cones, practicing steering,

stopping; sometimes we set up barrels for them to practice, and then, at the end, we have a fun game. 'Red Light, Green Light' seems to be the most popular, no matter what age group I teach," she smiles.

Cohen has many wonderful stories of how therapeutic riding helps her students break through their limitations, including a ten-year-old girl who is blind and deaf, and knows some sign language, including the sign for "more." Cohen was leading her on Handy, a 20-year-old ex-champion rope horse, working on walk-halt transitions around the arena.

"Sure enough, every time we'd stop, she started to sign 'more'. And one time, Handy broke into a little jog and I looked back, thinking, 'oh, gosh, this is too much for her.' She was smiling and signing 'more', so we started to do a little jog-walk and jog-halt transitions... and all of a sudden she started kicking out of her stirrups. She didn't want to ride with stirrups, even when we tried to put them on her feet, because she got so comfortable in the saddle," said Cohen.

Val Allyn is familiar with that feeling of joy and accomplishment from therapeutic riding.

"It's not just for people with MS. It's for anybody with a medical problem. To get on a horse and have to make a horse do what you want it to do, gives you overall coordination, balance when you ride, and your self-esteem, self-confidence just falls into place," she said. "I'm excited to go to the next show." 🐾

For information about the Bright Horizon Therapeutic Riding Center, visit www.brighthorizonriding.org. Learn more about therapeutic riding at www.NARHA.org.



Val Allyn rides Delight in the warm up arena at the Yamhill Co. Fairgrounds, McMinnville, OR. Her support team is Delight's owner, Hayley, and riding instructor Polly Cohen, with 2-year-old son Riley.



Val Allyn performs her dressage test at an Oregon Dressage Society horse show in McMinnville.