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WELLESLEY LEAR

Urban cowkids

In City to Saddle program, city kids cultivate a country passion

By David Ertischek
TOWNSMAN STAFF

On Monday, Nikia "Rocky" Powers cried because she was scared of riding a pony. On Wednesday, she cried because she thought she would not get to ride. By Friday, she was dancing in front of the ponies at the Dana Hall Riding Center.

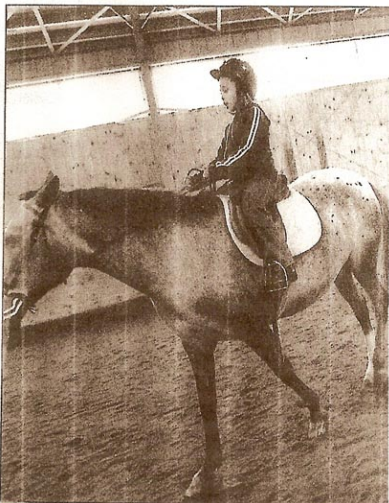
Seven-year-old Rocky, a nickname she acquired from her middle name, Raquel, is one of eight children awarded a scholarship this summer to attend the City to Saddle program run through the Dana Hall center. Rocky's church, the Bible Way Christian Center in Dorchester, had an enrichment program that made it possible for them to participate.

The City to Saddle program was co-created by Kim Summers of Medfield, a riding instructor for the center for 11 years, and Barbra Zenker of

"It's something I wanted to do for a long time," said Summers. "When I met Barbra, who was a student of mine a couple of years ago, she had the same idea. We wanted to offer an opportunity to students who didn't have the opportunity to learn about horses and ponies. I had the facilities and Barbra had the time. We were able to get the Bible Way Center involved since my church in Medfield, the Unitarian Church of Medfield, is a sister church of theirs."

And thanks to Summers and Zenker, they have introduced a very new and exciting world to Rocky and Genesis James, 7, also from Dorchester.

Genesis' grandfather, William James, who is the pastor of the Bible Way Christian Center and transports the students back and forth from Dorchester in the center's van, explains how his granddaugh-



Nikia "Rocky" Powers, 7, of Dorchester, rides Oreo during a horse drill in the Center in Wellesley.

WELLESLEY LEARNING

"It's like Christmastime in July. You can see it in their eyes. One of the days I was late to pick up Nikia [Rocky], and she was crying when I got there because she thought I had forgotten to pick her up and thought she wasn't going to get to ride the ponies that day."

"The excitement they have is incredible. They tell me about everything, from the morning to the afternoon, on the ride there and back. I'm excited, too. The staff and kids have been great, too. They've made

me feel welcome and I hope they make friends for a lifetime."

"I was scared at first," said Genesis, her beautiful brown eyes shining as she watched the ponies in the indoor riding center. "After the first day I was OK. I love trotting and playing musical ponies [a game of musical chairs played with ponies.]"

Genesis, who won musical ponies on Friday, listed Oreo, a white pony with brown specks, as her favorite because "she's fast and nice."

Rocky, whose favorite pony is Freddy, openly admits her fear on the first day. "I was scared. I was riding Betty and she kept on shifting her weight, so I thought I was going to fall off."

Rocky and Genesis do not like Betty. In fact, most of the children agreed that Betty bites.

But Rocky and Genesis, who had never ridden horses before, have gotten to know Betty despite her affinity for nipping.

"In the first week, the students learn how to touch the horse, react to the horse and sense the horse's feelings from

their body language," Zenker said. "They get riding lessons, and horsemanship — which is learning how to groom the horses, take care of them, give them water and food, and what to do if the horses get a cut."

"It's a great experience," said Sara DeVecchio of Dedham, one of the program's riding instructors. "Some kids don't want to be here. But it's so obvious they want to be here. They're having so much fun. It's good to give them new experiences and it teaches responsibility. Horses are dependent on you to clean them and feed them. It teaches each boy and girl patience."

DeVecchio, who is also the morning camp director, instructs the "young ones" — children ages 7 to 12 — from 8:30 in the morning until noon. They are all children who have never ridden a horse or pony before.

"Also on the first day, we talked about our riding helmets, riding boots with heel [sneakers could slip through the stirrup]," said DeVecchio. "And we got to know Betty, Star, Oreo and Blue, who are all school horses. These ponies are very patient



Nikia "Rocky" Powers helps another riding student clean a saddle in the tack room.

with beginners, and are used to having someone on their back for three hours a day."

"The Dover Saddlery in Wellesley gave the program all the boots and helmets," said Zenker. "And we [Zenker and Summers] raised over \$6,000 from the Dana Hall riding community. We sent out letters asking for donations. And we actually have enough money left over to start a little endowment for next year."

The cost for each child for the program is \$650 per each two-week session. The highlight of

each session is at the end of second week, when there's a horse show and the student is able to show off all the learned.

"Are we going to learn to jump?" asked Rock Zenker.

"Yes, we're going to learn about jumping poles," answered Zenker. "We're going to walk the ponies around poles and go over them."

"But we're going to jump?" reiterated Rock Zenker. "Because I want to show my parents that next week."



Henry Deloach III, 1, waves at his cousin, Genesis James, 7, through the visitors' window at the Dana Hall Riding Center.