The Enduring Power of HOPE

As the pandemic ravaged New York, a therapeutic riding program saved their herd and the future

By Katie Navarra

Charm and Rosebud peer through the slatted sides of the horse trailer that has come to take them home, eyes level and unwavering, a steady presence even now, when so much has changed.

Home. Back to the streets of New York, to the therapeutic riding center where they are the healing guardians of frail bodies and psyches. The steady clip of hooves and they are across the sidewalk, heads lowered, back to the stalls they left when the spread of coronavirus closed the city and the barn.

There are new signs on the big double doors leading into the GallopNYC stables in Queens. "Help us Keep our Barn Safe." "Wear a Face Covering." "Wash your Hands Often." "Practice Social Distancing."

The plastic water buckets, the sweet green of hay, the weathered wood, all familiar. But beyond these walls, the world has shifted in the pandemic.

On March 20, with New York the epicenter of the outbreak, lessons halted at GallopNYC, which specializes in therapeutic riding for people with emotional, developmental and physical challenges.

Without lessons, there was no income.

The program maintains about 40 horses. When

Executive Director James Wilson realized that the closure of non-essential businesses mandated by New York state would not end anytime soon, he made a difficult decision: To save the 15-year-old stable and ensure riders would have a place to come back to, he cut expenses by sending the horses away. One by one they boarded a trailer for a private farm upstate.

"As an organization we decided it was cheaper to take care of the horses out of town," Wilson said. "We have a partner upstate who retires horses for us, and she took 25 of our horses. We let them have a vacation, be out in a field, eat grass and enjoy sunshine."

Some of the horses received an early retirement while others waited for a return to serving their riders. Barn staff visited the herd and reported that, after a few weeks in the country, they were all fat, happy and relaxed.

Wilson said he wasn't surprised by how quickly the horses adapted to their new surroundings; what he did not expect was the outpouring of support when GallopNYC launched a fundraising campaign called *#feedtheherd*. The campaign kicked off in late March and reminded the community that it costs $275 a month to feed and care for each horse – and a total of $55,000 every month for the program to survive, even without lessons.

Donations poured in after a *New York Times* reporter captured the staff's tearful goodbyes to the horses as they loaded up for the trip north. Nearly 85% of the $40,000 goal was achieved in just one month.

"People that we don't know, people from all parts of the country and the world have supported our horses and the work that we do," Wilson said. "That's really encouraging and resonates with a lot of people."

The measure of support helped to fill the silence. Normally, GallopNYC serves 500 riders with disabilities each week. A space that was usually full of laughter, excitement and activity was quiet.

"Early this spring it was disconcerting to tell people they couldn't come to the barn. I was really afraid people would forget about us," Wilson said. "My team was excited about finding ways to remind people we were still here and that we were all in this together."

Lesson instructors led programs for young riders to encourage them to get up and move their bodies and keep exercising their muscles the way they did while riding.

They hosted arts and crafts and book clubs for children and adults. GallopNYC also serves veterans, offering both a riding program and one that includes horse care and groundwork. Wilson said they found the vets were especially positive about the remote programming and Zoom video options.

In some ways, Wilson added, he feels the online interaction has created even stronger ties with the community, and some of the programming will continue as GallopNYC fully returns to riding.

"It is weird trying to teach horseback riding over the internet," he said. "But essentially we are focused on trying to improve the lives of people with disabilities even when we can't be together."

In early June, GallopNYC began again: one-on-one, with lessons for those riders who are fairly independent. Riders who need physical support began to return in late summer, although because of health precautions, any side walking assistance – walking on either side of the rider to help them stay balanced and secure in the saddle – had to come from the individual's family or "pod" rather than volunteers.

"Before the pandemic, we would ask volunteers to sidewalk with our riders that needed physical support," Wilson said. "In today's environment, however, we will not ask volunteers to put themselves this close to another person."

Private lessons replaced group instruction although, as Wilson noted, "horses by definition are social distanced because you do not ride on top of each other. Everyone is masked and feels safe at the barn."

By the first week of September, with all the horses back home, the lesson program was able to accommodate each of its riders, including the 100 or so recreational riders whose classes help to underwrite the therapeutic work.

Still, the financial effects continue to be felt, as they do at many non-profits across New York, and lasting support is essential. One community challenge asked sponsors to donate 300 lessons to Gallop's scholarship fund. The annual Barn Dance fundraiser, typically held in the spring, was rescheduled three times before becoming an online event in late September, celebrating the horses' return to the city and the program's return to riding.

But while the 'new normal' still changes every day, one thing remains the same: Horses are healers, emotionally and physically. Keeping GallopNYC open means that the children, adults and veterans who have learned new skills and independence through riding, will have access to the barn and its horses for years to come.

"We're beginning to see the kids and adult riders here again and that's my favorite part," Wilson said. "Our community supporters, staff and volunteers are important to making that possible."

A sliver of sunlight slips through the wooden slats of his stall and settles on Charm. The gentle roan looks up, mid-munch, a few wisps of hay dangling from his mouth.

Journey's end.
Home at last.