

Victory Ranch Inc.

Kids saddle up for a taste of life in the countryside.

Clouds roll across a temperamental autumn sky at Almaden Equestrian Center as Victory Ranch Inc. Founder Doug Hutten leads an excited group of children toward their newest teacher—a chestnut-colored horse named Dun-It. “The kids are just meeting him for the first time today,” Hutten explains, handing out carrots for them to offer their new friend. “Now remember, no sudden movements. We don’t want to scare him,” he says. The children, all of whom come from foster care families in Santa Clara County, tiptoe gently toward the horse, reaching their hands out to stroke his neck in what is the beginning of a relationship that will likely change their lives.

In the mere 14 months that Victory Ranch has been operating programs at the Equestrian Center, they have catered to a wide array of mentally disabled, at-risk, and disadvantaged youth. By first teaching basics, such as ranch vocabulary and safety, then helping each individual build a relationship with one of the horses, Hutten hopes his non-profit’s free 12-week program gives its participants a new lease on life. “There’s a transformation that happens when the kids leave their normal lifestyles, with all the streets and noises and computer games, and come out here,” he says. “And, once they get involved with the animals, we see them growing closer and closer to experiencing what I discovered years ago—that magical bond that can exist between people and horses.”

It’s a bond that Hutten has known since he was a child growing up alongside horses and ponies in Colorado. When he began to volunteer years ago with an equestrian program for autistic children through B.O.K. Ranch in Woodside, dreams for his own non-profit ranch began to form. “I learned that pairing horses with disadvantaged kids can help them have a different perspective on life,” he explains. “Interacting with such a large animal allows us to feel and sense an almost spiritual connection.” And despite the gambit of personalities Hutten has worked with, he says that every one of them, whether struggling with ADHD or autism, is able to make that connection. “Kids are so in need of programs like this,” he adds.

Thanks to a few like-minded members of the community, a handful of kids are



able to have such programs. Grants from the Dean Witter Foundation, the Morgan Family Foundation, and the Sorenson Foundation made Hutten’s dream possible, and the Almaden Equestrian Center’s generosity gave the three beloved horses and one pony at the Ranch a place to rest their heads. “We’re honored to be housed at the Center—it’s such a great family-oriented place,” Hutten says, adding that Victory Ranch is already planning to expand within the Bay Area.

When students graduate from the “Buckaroos” program for beginners, they can go on, if they so choose, to receive free riding lessons from Hutten. But true success at Victory Ranch is not measured by progression to any next level, per se, but by what the kids will take away with them when they hang up their cowboy hats or riding helmets and head home.

“Getting to know horses and ponies can be a magical experience,” Hutten says. “I put kids in touch with that experience, then let them find out what it’s about for themselves. And I know we’re successful because of the smiles I see on their faces, the smiles in their hearts.” Looking around the Ranch, it’s hard not to notice that, indeed, all the children are smiling. ■

www.victoryranchinc.org

— LINDSAY SCHAUER

Ways You Can Help

- Volunteer your time helping with horses, children, or other tasks.
- Take a visit to the Almaden Equestrian Center to see what Victory Ranch does and to find out more about volunteer and donation opportunities.
- Donate a loving old horse to the Ranch programs.