

Special Needs Riding High at the Crossroads

Horseback riding and gardening have long been recognized as popular hobbies. But in Allentown, N.J. they are much more than that. Allentown is home to Riding High Farm which, in turn, hosts Crossroads. Both are unique opportunities for people with special needs. And United Methodists play a role at the Crossroads.

It is well known that in a time of economic crisis such as the present, special needs programs are among the first to feel cuts in government funding and are among programs least able to afford those cuts. It is probably less well-known that most of the government-funded assistance for people with special needs cease at the end of the teen-age years. Young adults with special needs frequently find themselves suddenly on their own without the support systems for them and their families.

Allies, Inc. is one of the better known organizations working to address those needs, with 10 years experience as a non-profit organization. According to founders Krystal Odell and Elise Gambino, Allies Inc. is dedicated to "finding the absolute best homes and providing the highest quality support services to enhance not only the physical, but the social and emotional lives of people with special needs."

Operating state-wide Allies, Inc. has developed over 150 homes in New Jersey for people with special needs. Beyond providing homes, they offer job training and independent living development and community connections, allowing their clients to live genuinely full lives. That desire for community connection and independent living is

what brought Allies and Riding High Farm to help sponsor Crossroads.

Riding High Farm is a therapeutic horseback riding program celebrating its 30th year. Accredited by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, the organization's goal is to "enhance the lives of program participants by building healthy emotional bonds between riders and the uniquely trained horses that work with them."

The farm has also generously provided acreage for Crossroads which is described as "a unique community day and employment experience for people with special needs." Specially geared to post-high school age participants, Crossroads provides "a creative way to build positive relationships through volunteerism, equine care and horticultural therapy." In other words, young adults with special needs are given the opportunity to help take care of the horses being used in the riding therapy, farming their own plot of ground, and selling the produce or distributing it at local food banks.

Linda Barton, Spiritual Growth Advisor to the United Methodist Women of the Greater New Jersey Conference and a member of the Hightstown Church, serves on the conference Special Needs Task Force and as a Community Connector for Allies Inc. She works at Crossroads and is committed to the program that she describes as supplying "a structured environment in which special needs folks can grow and blossom."

Ms. Barton observed that the chance for people with special needs to come several days per week to tend their farm plots "helps their self esteem



HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW? Linda Barton, Spiritual Growth Advisor to the United Methodist Women of the Greater New Jersey Conference and a member of the conference Special Needs Task Force, joins Ashley and her mother, Pam, weeding their garden plot during a recent visit to the Crossroads farm at Riding High Farm. (Photo by Jack Shaw)

and lets them know that they are God's children. People living on the fringe can be part of the Community of Grace."

The Rev. Jackie Burgess, Chair of the GNJ Special Needs Task Force, expressed enthusiastic support for this ecumenical ministry and described the project as very exciting."

A recent visit to the Crossroads farm at Riding High Farm revealed several people with special needs busily tending their plots. Ashley was there with her mother, Pam, who noted that they had eggplant that morning that they had grown right there. Ashley smiled brightly at the thought of the eggplant and also added, "I love the horse farm!"

To continue to provide this ministry, Crossroads needs volunteer help daily from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. New Jersey has had great success in recent

years as a breeding and training ground for horses, with local winners in horse racing's fabled Triple Crown. New Jersey has also long carried the moniker of "the Garden State" for obvious reasons.

Among United Methodists in NJ people like Linda Barton carry the Wesleyan tradition of ministering to all the people with special attention to the disadvantaged. You could say that combining all these factors is Riding High at the Crossroads. You can reach Linda Barton about Crossroads and Allies Inc. at lbarton@alliesnj.org or by calling (609) 689-0136 ext 142. Riding High Farm is located at 145 Route 526 in Allentown, and can be reached by contacting Program Director Robyn Struz at robyn@ridinghighfarm.org or (609) 259-3884 ext 3.

— Jack Shaw

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CELEBRATING A CENTURY IN VINELAND



THE BIBLE, THE HYMNAL and other symbols of her life and faith, including her portrait on the cake, mark the 100th birthday of Mrs. Bessie Williams on October 4 as First Church, Vineland, celebrates her day. During worship, greetings were shared from Bishop Devadhar and the Rev. Richard W. Nichols, Delaware Bay District Superintendent. A legislative proclamation was given by Senator Jeff Van Drew along with Assemblymen Nelson Albano and Matt Milam, a member of First Church who spoke personally about Mrs. Williams' contributions to the life of the church. Attending the birthday girl is Patricia Cummines, also of First Church.

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