

LAUREN GILCHRIST

Sharky was snowy white and furry with a soft grey mane but it didn't matter that he was a horse. He was Mikayla Llewellyn's best friend.

As part of the PARD therapeutic riding program, operating out of a stable near Keene, 11-year-old Mikayla spent a lot of time with Sharky over the past two years, learning how to ride the 18-year-old draft/quarterhorse cross.

"There was a real connection there," says Joanne Beattie, Mikayla's mother.

She says it was Mikayla's therapist that introduced her to the PARD program, a Peterborough-based not-for-profit organization geared towards riders with disabilities, including those afflicted with multiple sclerosis or spina bifida as well as those with stroke, and visual and hearing challenges. It's also proven to be of benefit to those with an intellectual disability.

Ms Beattie explains Mikayla was born with a diaphragmatic hernia, which a defect or hole in the diaphragm that allows the abdominal contents to move into the chest cavity. She says the PARD program has helped her daughter, who attends Havelock Public School, in ways she never could have imagined.

She notes her daughter also has an anxiety disorder, which means it's often hard for her to make friends.

"I can't even put it into words what it has done for her. It's like it has empowered her. All of a sudden she just started to blossom," says Ms Beattie.

"She went from disabled to abled. That opened a door for her to feel confident that she could do other things."

Ms Beattie says her daughter was initially terrified of horses but notes PARD volunteers worked with her once a week over the past two years to the point where Mikayla was up and riding Sharky.

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"They know what they are doing; these people have a passion to help these kids," she says.

"It's amazing. As soon as she gets on there, a smile comes on her face. This is for her. This is something she can do. Without PARD, she wouldn't have the opportunity to do this."

Kathy Carruthers says there are many both physical and emotional

benefits for riders in the PARD program.

"The nice part of the therapy part is that it's in a non-clinical environment," explains Ms Carruthers, head instructor with PARD.

Tall in the saddle and then some



Sharky

Ms Carruthers says, emotionally, she sees a lot of young people gain confidence through the program, and interact with the other volunteers and the riders. The benefits also include development of co-ordination, strengthening of muscles, improved balance, improved attention span and increased confidence and self-esteem.

Ms Beattie says horseback riding became Mikayla's thing and Sharky was "her" horse.

On July 19, Sharky suddenly died.

Although Mikayla is able to ride one of the three remaining horses at PARD, she carries a little plastic white horse that resembles Sharky around with her in her pocket.

Ms Beattie says losing Sharky hit both riders and volunteers hard, and highlights how desperately PARD needs funding. Riders in the program only pay a nominal fee for classes.

"We are solely dependent upon community support and volunteers. There is no paid position," explains Tracy Magee-Graham, chair of the board of directors for PARD.

She notes the program, that operates twice a week from May to October, already has a waiting list because there are not enough horses and volunteers to meet the demand.

She adds because each rider is carefully matched with a horse, there are some riders that rode Sharky that are now left on the sidelines, although they have found a temporary match for Mikayla.

To raise money for the program, PARD is holding its 2010 Schooling Show competition and fundraiser this Sunday (Aug. 15) at 570 Woodside Rd. near Keene.

The show kicks off at 9 a.m. and will feature riders from PARD along with riders from other local barns competing for cash prizes. Classes include a walk/trot division, a showmanship division and a jumper division.

"They are judged on level," explains Ms Carruthers, noting the event is open to the public.

She says all money raised from this event, collected through an entrance fee, will go towards purchasing more horses along with the costs of stabling the horses they currently have.

Riders can register up until the morning of the show but registration forms are available online at www.pard.ca. Drop off your forms c/o Peterborough This Week at 884 Ford St. in Peterborough.

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