

FamilyCircle

No-Cook Summer Meals

HOW TO GET
FREE STUFF
ONLINE!

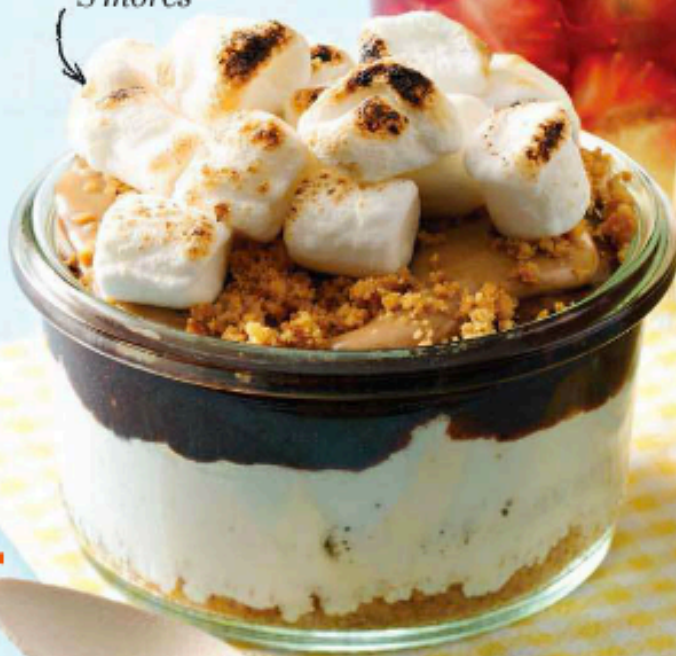
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*The #1 Way to
Be Healthy*

**Fast.
Fresh.
Fun.**
10 Fruit
Desserts

**Best
Towns for
Families**

*Peanut Butter
S'mores*



*Strawberry
Shortcake*



*Blueberry-
Peach Parfait*



Unbridled Spirit



Harnessing her love of horses, Dana Spett created a therapeutic riding school for children and adults with disabilities.

BY ELEANOR GILMAN



Dana Spett was one of those girls who couldn't get enough of her horse. Growing up in Old Tappan, New Jersey, she rode her pony, Huff n Puff, every day from kindergarten through high school and cofounded an equestrian team in college. After all those years in the saddle, Dana, 48, was well aware of the benefits of the human-equine bond. But she had no idea just how precious that partnership was until she became a mother.

It was 14 years ago when Dana realized that something was different with her 3-year-old daughter, Sydney. She had an extreme need to touch things, and also sat with her legs in a W shape—knees forward and feet behind—a sign of low muscle tone. Both are symptoms of sensory processing disorder (SPD), a condition in which the brain has difficulty decoding

Left: A lifelong equestrian, Dana Spett shares the benefits of riding. Below: Sydney Spett has experienced the healing power of horses.



Photo: Jarell Courtesy of Pony Power.



Dana (far left) and her daughter Zoe (far right) assist a rider at Three Sisters Farm.

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information from the senses and responding to it appropriately.

Sydney immediately began occupational therapy but plateaued after a few months, so Dana started thinking about alternative treatment approaches, like horseback riding. Sydney had already taken a few lessons and enjoyed it immensely. “I did some research in the library and discovered that people with SPD can benefit greatly from riding, because it strengthens the core and improves balance,” she says. Since she liked working with horses, Dana decided to help Sydney herself by training to become a Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International instructor. Six months later, certification in hand, all she needed was a horse. While checking the ads at a tack shop near her home in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, she saw a notice from

someone offering to donate Mat, a retired, companionable show horse. “Sydney loved riding Mat,” Dana recalls. “She was happier and calmer, and she quickly developed better coordination and upper-body strength.”

Inspired by Sydney’s remarkable transformation, Dana launched Pony Power, a nonprofit therapeutic riding program, later that year. She started with four children, all on the autism spectrum, and charged only a modest fee to defray some of the costs.

Thanks to word of mouth, Dana’s services were so in demand that she needed to expand. In 2002 she and her husband, Steven, 50, a CPA, bought a horse property in nearby Mahwah that they named Three Sisters Farm, after Sydney and her siblings Emma and Zoe. It’s crucial for Dana that no one is turned away from Pony Power. If a family can’t

afford the fee, she tries her best to arrange for alternative funding, such as a scholarship provided by local foundations.

Today Three Sisters Farm works with up to 175 participants weekly: children and adults with some form of autism, cerebral palsy, developmental delay or mental health issues. “Many of these people are in a wheelchair all day,” says Dana. “When they’re on a horse, they’re stretching, engaging and strengthening their muscles.” And their confidence gets a boost too. “Imagine being unable to participate in the simplest of physical activities and then being successful controlling a 1,000-pound animal,” says Dana. “It’s a great feeling.”

The team has seen their impact on every rider, especially Sydney, now 18 and soon to be a sophomore at Union College. Dana attributes her daughter’s success to riding and working on the farm. Sydney and Zoe, 16, assist with training the horses, grooming and saddling them, as well as doing chores around the barn. (Emma, 20, did the same until she started college last year.) “They know the program inside out,” says Dana. “They’re always first to help others.” Harnessing her passion and seeing Pony Power grow has been a source of great satisfaction for Dana. “Riding has been a huge part of my life,” she says. “I can’t express what it means to see how much it’s improved Sydney’s health and done the same for so many others. I hope to keep exploring the possibilities to help even more people.”

SADDLE CLUB

● Three Sisters Farm has 17 horses who have gone through rigorous training to desensitize them to inexperienced, off-balance riders who can suddenly have outbursts or seizures.

● Pony Power has approximately 100 volunteers each semester as well as five full-time and three part-time paid instructors.

● At least three people—including a certified instructor and two volunteers—assist each rider.

To learn more or make a donation, visit ponypowernj.org.