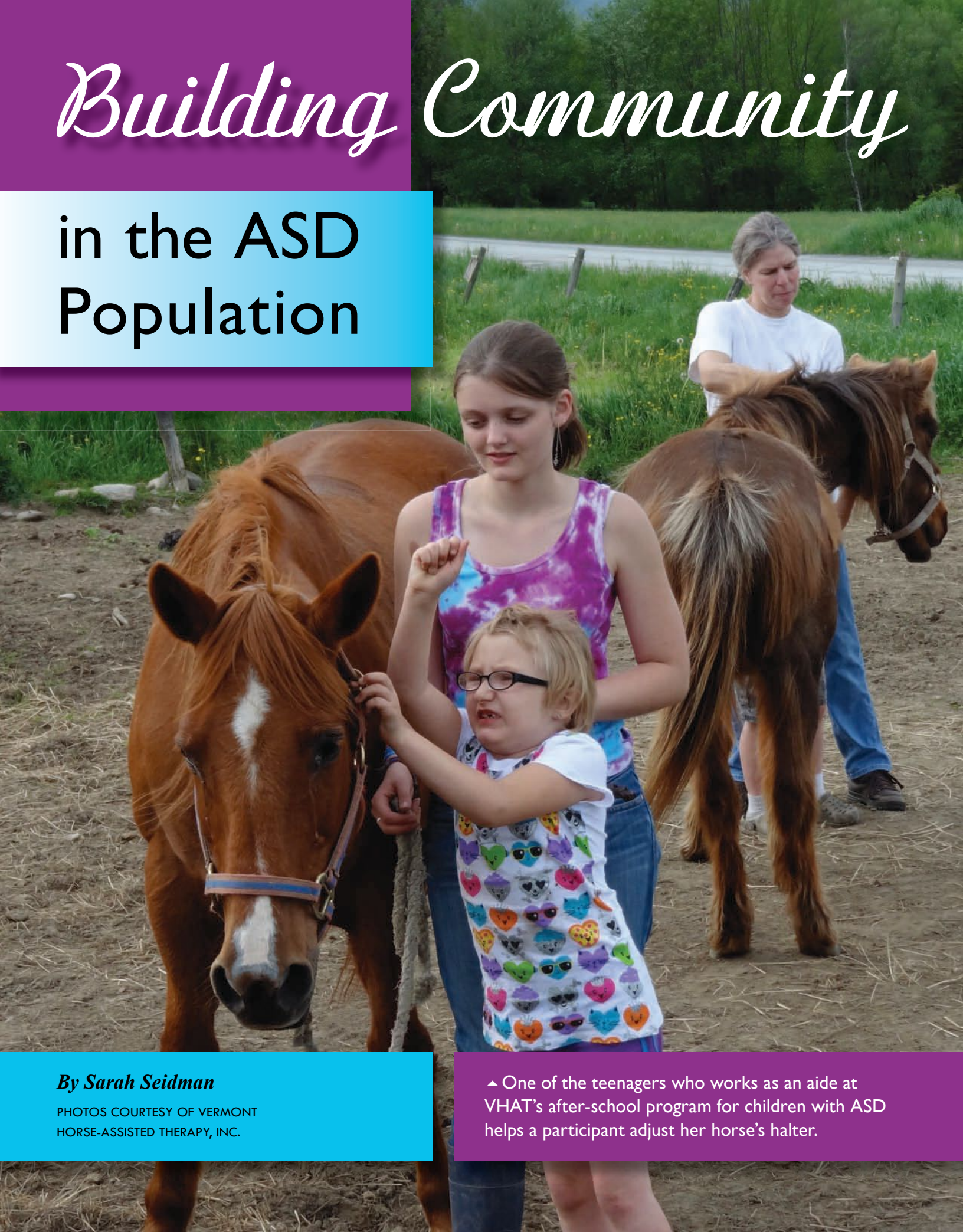


Building Community

in the ASD Population



By Sarah Seidman

PHOTOS COURTESY OF VERMONT
HORSE-ASSISTED THERAPY, INC.

▲ One of the teenagers who works as an aide at WHAT's after-school program for children with ASD helps a participant adjust her horse's halter.

VERMONT

Montpelier

THE TEEN ELEMENT

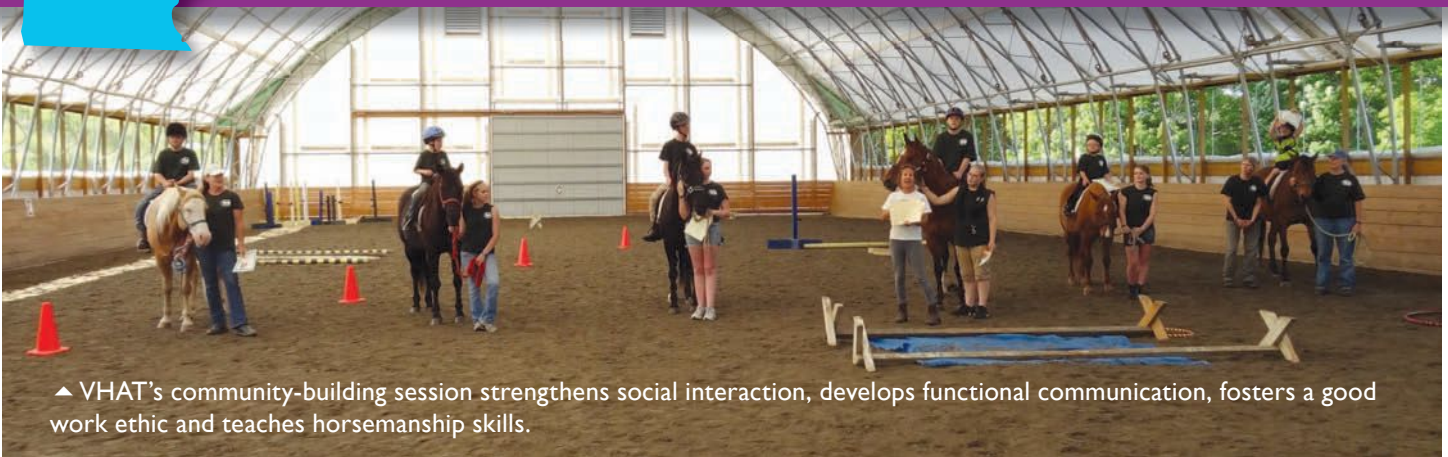
Teenagers from area schools who have been identified as at-risk act as aides (four to five aides per session) for each eight weeks of VHAT's therapeutic horsemanship program to build community among students with ASD. In the program, they:

- ▶ are required to have appropriate experience with horses
- ▶ are trained to work one-on-one with participants with special needs
- ▶ receive on-site mentoring/guidance from senior instructors/program leader
- ▶ are expected to supervise a participant

- ▶ teach horsemanship skills
- ▶ model positive behavior for those with greater challenges

As a result of their training and work with participants, teenagers who volunteer at VHAT:

- ▶ learn patience, tolerance and understanding
- ▶ develop healthy boundaries
- ▶ engage socially and work as a team
- ▶ identify positive women role models
- ▶ build safe relationships in a highly supervised setting
- ▶ demonstrate leadership skills



▲ VHAT's community-building session strengthens social interaction, develops functional communication, fosters a good work ethic and teaches horsemanship skills.

Just outside Montpelier, the state capitol of Vermont, Vermont Horse Assisted Therapy, Inc. (VHAT), has created an eight-week after-school program that builds community among participants with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

"Autism can be a condition of profound isolation," said Sarah Seidman, a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor and Centered Riding Instructor Level III who founded VHAT. To counteract that isolation, the VHAT program, which is run out of Pease Farm Stable in Middlesex, VT, helps participants form attachments and engage with others. "These participants are usually taught one-on-one at their schools, and the social and communication difficulties that characterize autism mean they often retreat into their own worlds rather than relate effectively with their peers or teachers. Our program for

participants of ages eight to 18 years old strengthens social interaction, develops functional communication, fosters a good work ethic and teaches horsemanship skills."

Each week starts with a group unmounted activity in the arena. The five teenage aides, who are an integral part of fostering community, assist participants in singing the "Farm Song." Each participant is asked (and sometimes prompted) to offer his or her own verbal answer to the song's question: "What do we do on the farm?" For every answer, all participants mimic brushing, carrying water, scooping manure or galloping around the arena. Next, the group races from letter to letter in the arena and then acts out a verb that starts with that letter, for example, "At B we.....Bounce!"

These activities do more than release pent-up physical energy after a long day at school. They actively build

"Autism can be a condition of profound isolation."



teamwork and require social interaction and the use of functional language, skills participants with autism need to practice. Participants partner one-on-one with instructors and teenage aides to preview the day's assignment.

The program works with the teenage aides, who have been identified as at-risk, as crucial team members. "Our teens may be economically disadvantaged, they may be dealing with family issues or having social or emotional troubles that limit their success in school," Seidman said. "At the farm, they are respected and given tasks that help them improve their skills and self-esteem. Engaging these participants on the ASD spectrum can be a real challenge for everyone. Some are completely nonverbal, others use mostly echo language, but we found that they are much more attuned to people closer to their own ages, so we have the teenagers model the behaviors and the verbal responses we are seeking."

Fostering Independence

Because learned helplessness is a significant issue in the special needs population, participants learn to catch, lead and groom the horses with increasing independence and fewer verbal prompts over the eight-week program. WHAT emphasizes that the participant, not the instructor, leads the way, choosing and demonstrating the use of the correct item for grooming and how to saddle with only enough help to make sure the horses stay comfortable. No bridles are used, although some participants earn the right to have reins attached to halters by demonstrating proficient balance at the walk and trot. Once mounted, participants learn to:

- ▶ complete an obstacle course
- ▶ ride indoors and outdoors
- ▶ take a trail ride with leaders through the pastures and sensory trail

- ▶ try riding bareback if they want
- ▶ practice walking, halting, turning and trotting with airplane arms
- ▶ participate in a final show for parents, teachers and community members

WHAT is dedicated to the principles of Centered Riding® developed by Vermonter Sally Swift. Many participants with autism are physically able to make use of Swift's inspired four basics—centering, soft eyes, breathing and building blocks—to improve their body mechanics when mounted.

WHAT believes a key element of building community is a sense of belonging. Being on a working farm offers many opportunities for the team to accomplish a task together that no single person could do alone, Seidman said. "This year we had all eight kids help us move the heavy hay elevator and the picnic tables to winter storage. It was a great feeling when one of the higher functioning participants called to one of the reluctant ones to pitch in and help. Another time, we handed out rakes, and they raked huge piles of leaves and then had fun jumping in the piles. One of our participants, Juno, doesn't talk willingly, so it was a delight when she piped up to say, 'More jump!'"

Other work tasks include picking rocks out of the paddocks, raking the perimeter of the arena, helping prepare snacks and feeding hay to the horses. "Every person in the program is required to complete a work job before the group gathers at the end of the program for a snack and sharing circle," she continued. "We ask each person, 'What did you like today?' or 'What did you learn today?' Then instructors, teens and participants report on how the day went, offering participants verbal cues if needed."

"At the farm, they are respected and given tasks

◀ LEFT: When VHAT participants develop caring partnerships with their horses, they overcome their initial fears, develop greater independence and practice respect and kindness.

◀ RIGHT: Participants with social and communication difficulties are encouraged to form attachments and engage with others.

Parent Nicole Moran described how the program's focus on facilitating independence and team-building furthered her son's self-assurance and esteem. "Before my son went to VHAT for the first time, he was scared to even approach a horse. In his second year, he was timid at first that he wouldn't remember what to do, but he got right back on the horse the very first day! That's the kind of confidence VHAT has given my son."

In return, her son Parker, who has Asperger syndrome, created his own new game. He then taught his teammates how to do "horse-o-metry" by walking the horse from letter to letter in the arena to create shapes, like rhomboids and parallelograms, which he was practicing in geometry at school.

Benefits for Teen Aides and Parents

What Seidman did not foresee was the positive effect the program would have on the young aides. "It was an unexpected bonus to see how strong the bonding became among the teens. For the most part, these are not the 'cool kids,' and they come from several different high schools and don't always know each other. They have their own physical and social issues, but they learn to put their problems in perspective when they see the challenges their participants face."

Teens learn to supervise a participant, teach horsemanship skills, demonstrate leadership, model positive behavior and exhibit patience, tolerance and healthy boundaries. Their role models and supervisors are adult instructors such as PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor Becca Reggio and Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning Susan Mitchell.

High school junior Lindsey Noordsij said, "Working

with Andy was a different experience from my past work with special needs kids at VHAT...he had much more difficult challenges to work around, such as his fear of dogs, sensitivity to sudden movements and his easily distracted mind. When Andy was able to focus, he had a lot of fun riding. He loved trotting, and although it took a while, on the seventh week we were able to get him to trot without holding on. It was a big deal since all through the program he had been too nervous to do so. My central focus was getting him to feel safe around the farm."

Not all participants with ASD can tolerate the noise level of some group activities, and VHAT made accommodations if necessary to remove participants to keep them, the horses and other riders safe. Working with participants who needed to be accommodated because of sensory processing issues simultaneously tested and strengthened the aides' ability to relate to their students. Julian, for instance, a nonverbal 17-year-old who used earphones still needed to remain at a distance from the singing.

Julian's aide, teenager Flora-Sae Chessman-Chaplin, said, "He liked making animal noises, and not only did it help keep his attention on what I was saying, but it also helped his sensory disorders and kept him from screaming and yelling so much. I will admit I was a bit worried about working with Julian at first. However, I enjoyed the challenge, and I also enjoyed the gentle nature he showed around horses. It was a pleasure to work with Julian, and I learned not only more about him as a participant and person but also about myself."

While the teens and instructors work with participants, the parents or caregivers are encouraged to trade notes on their own or just relax on the sofas in VHAT's comfy new family room. VHAT has found having parents watch each lesson can be distracting to the participant and inhibit team-building.

"It's a wonderfully satisfying experience for us to participate in a program designed specifically for children (and families) affected by ASD," said Liza Walker, whose daughter, Juno, has attended the program for several years. "Despite the support provided by our public school, it is a great relief to be among a community for two hours a week in which our child's unique characteristics feel 'normal' and to be served by a program designed to meet Juno's needs, rather than just accommodate them. While Juno has limited language, her vocabulary and verbalizations have also expanded with horseback riding, and it is a thrill to see her

that help them improve their skills and self-esteem"

so excited by an activity that also will help her develop her balance and gross motor skills.”

Local Support

With eight participants, eight horses, five aides and three instructors, finding the funding to keep this program affordable is always a challenge. VHAT is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and VHAT Executive Director Donna Prudhomme said two different foundations and a number of generous private donors make it possible for each family to pay only \$50 for the eight-week program to cover snacks and the handmade awards handed out at the final demonstration.

“We are committed to a continuum of services for each participant, and often we see significant improvement if we are able to offer the family more than one session of the program,” Prudhomme noted. “Sometimes participants go on to individual or group lessons, while the teens can apply to attend our advanced equine studies summer camp. There they get daily mounted lessons, hands-on workshops with the farrier and veterinarian, business classes and a realistic overview of the equine industry.

“The fact that this program is about to begin its eighth year says a lot about how well it’s been received by the community,” Prudhomme added. “We are getting referrals from schools, local mental health agencies, as well as by word of mouth among the autism community.”

VHAT recognizes the need to improve its documentation of student outcomes, which are currently anecdotal. In the future the program intends to make more use of videotape/photos; post-program interviews with parents, caregivers and staff; written reports from instructors/aides; and testimonial letters from parents. There is also a crucial need for more quantitative assessment protocols and the use of these assessments to continually improve the program, which would require additional resources and funding.

What VHAT has been able to accomplish within the scope of its current resources is to continually refine its activities to increase the variety of games and lessons that foster the greatest amount of social and verbal interaction among participants and among participants and their teachers. “We have so much fun,” Seidman said. “I think laughing, working and playing together and treating each other and our horse partners with respect and kindness is the best way for any community to succeed.”

Sarah Seidman, the founder of Vermont Horse Assisted Therapy, Inc. (VHAT), is a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor and Centered Riding® Instructor Level III who has worked with children and horses for more than 40 years. She currently oversees and manages all VHAT lesson and program plans, serving as VHAT’s program director. She can be reached at peasefarm@gmail.com.

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