

The Good News

HOPE ON HORSEBACK

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—Horseback-riding lessons build character as they teach kids about God’s faithfulness at local equestrian ministry

Before that day, no one even knew their names. Stacy Gormley and her horse, Fidelis, didn’t fit in among the well-to-do riders at the 2004 Junior Olympics. Fidelis was too small, and Gormley could never afford full-time riding lessons.

But Gormley’s family and community in Grand Rapids, Mich. rallied behind her when they saw her riding talent. It didn’t surprise them when she received the bronze medal in competitive horse training against all odds. Yet, not even they could imagine how God would go on to use Gormley.

He didn’t make her famous, and He didn’t turn her underdog championship into the plot for a Seabiscuit sequel. Instead, He asked her to give up her horse Fidelis, whose name means “faithful” in Latin.

“My parents needed to take Fidelis back and sell him for financial reasons. It was real hard for me to part with him, but I knew that it was the Lord’s will. ... “I never thought that I would really ride again,” Gormley said, patting her new horse, Zeline, one of 10 at Acts2Acres, a riding academy she helped create.

Through Gormley’s obedience, God was able to bless her with so much more than she could have ever imagined standing on the winner’s platform three years ago. After winning a medal at the Junior Olympics, she dreamed of “marrying” her love for children with her love for horses, and after working for a year as a foster mom at 4KIDS of South Florida, God placed the perfect opportunity right in her saddle.

When Gormley, 23, shared her dream with members at Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale, they told her about the DeStefano family – whose ranch-style home in Coconut Creek included an old barn and excess land. Gormley didn’t know them, but God brought them together after she was invited to rent a room in the couple’s South Florida home a year later. The DeStefanos were living in North Carolina and were trying to sell their property. But, when they returned to finalize the sale, they heard about Gormley’s dream.

The sale fell through, and they began to build Acts2Acres. “We had this house up for sale three times under contract, but we could not close the deal. The price was agreed on. The terms were agreed on, but for some reason we could not close the deal,” Margaret DeStefano said. “God had a higher calling for the property. It’s His property; we’re just the stewards of it.”

So with Gormley’s dream and the DeStefanos’ property, Acts2Acres opened last month after just five months of planning. It will be open year-long for horseback riding lessons and ministry. “I feel like we’re Facing the Giants,” DeStefano said. “We’re doing it for

the glory of God, and we can get there because He can.” They’ve also set up the Fidelis Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to giving abused and neglected children free therapeutic riding lessons and to “assure children of God’s faithfulness – one ride at a time.” “Kids need to feel safe and protected,” Gormley says. “And I think a 1,200-pound animal feels like a pretty good protector for a kid.”

Gormley, who has a degree in child psychology and has studied therapeutic riding, says there’s something about the smell and feel of a horse that stimulates a child’s brain. A group of mentally disabled children came to Acts2Acres recently and gave one of the horses named Lily a bath. “They were sitting there scrubbing the same spot and just feeling her coat for about 20 minutes before I said, ‘Okay, it’s time to hose her off now,’” Gormley says. “But it does something for them to be out of the house and to touch and smell and feel something different and inviting.” In fact, one young woman who was a part of the group asked if she could return when she gets depressed because she said, “This is the most happy I’ve ever been.” Gormley adds that there’s actual physical evidence of the effects of therapeutic horseback-riding.

“The motion of a horse’s trot actually neutralizes acids in a child’s brain that cause feelings of rage and anxiety. ...” she says. “A lot of kids become numb to their senses as a way of self defense, so one of the things we get them involved with is sensory stimulation with the horse.”

DeStefano also says there’s something healing about horses. She’s had an interest in horses for 16 years and says her relationship with God has been greatly impacted by working with the majestic animals. “The world would call it magic. But we call it spirit. ...” she says. “If you leave a kid alone with a horse, therapy will happen. We’re just facilitators of that therapy.”

The Fidelis Foundation is working very closely with [4KIDS of South Florida](#) to make therapeutic riding lessons available for foster care children in the area, but the Fidelis Foundation’s services will be available to all children in need.

Other services In addition to therapeutic lessons, Acts2Acres offers regular riding lessons, guided trail riding and a summer camp for kids. Mothers of preschoolers can even find the time to ride if they take advantage of Acts2Acres’ babysitting services. At the Acts2Acres summer camp starting June 4, children will not only ride, they’ll learn. They will learn how much water a horse drinks a day, how to “muck out” a horse’s stall and what the different parts of a saddle are called. Acts2Acres will also use rope games, faith-based curriculum and Bible stories to teach good character and virtues like loyalty and respect.

In addition to the summer camp, there will also be a classroom located at Acts2Acres in August for 12 students from **Florida Virtual School**, the country’s first state-wide Internet-based public high school. The students will do their work online for four hours a day with the help of a teacher’s aide and spend the rest of their day in P.E. class with the horses at the ranch.

For all other students, Acts2Acres will also offer an after-school program where students can earn a horseback riding lesson if they complete their homework and keep up a B average.

Through these incentive-based programs, the trainers at Acts2Acres hope to build individuals with Christ-like character – who are also experienced riders. And because the sport is so prohibitively expensive, they also hope to give some underprivileged children excellent training they couldn't otherwise afford. Then, they hope they'll be able to impact other horseback riders for Christ. "The horse world is a pretty dark place. It's all about competition and being the best. ..." Gormley said. "I want to build up some ambitious, talented kids to go out and be lights for Christ's sake in mainstream equestrian sports."

As Gormley's community once supported her, she hopes to support other young people through the Fidelis Foundation and Acts2Acres. By placing a horse's reigns in a child's hands, she also hopes to give them confidence and hope in the faithfulness of God – especially if they've been hurt by someone they once placed their trust in. "We want to rebuild and restore what has been wrongfully taken from these kids," Gormley says. "And we want to assure them of God's faithfulness. We want to be someone they can depend on. And through that they can open up, and they can heal."

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