



Jenny Landers, left, holding the reins of Desmond, and Jennifer Putnam, leading Unico, get the horses ready to practice with the BanDittos Drill Team for the Barbara DeNitto Memorial Horse Show at Ironstone Farm in Andover last fall.

Therapy 1 on four legs

At Ironstone Farm,
riding students are
the best in show

Down a bumpy dirt path, just miles from the intersection of two major highways, live 25 horses. Quietly tucked away on 20 acres at Ironstone Farm in Andover, the herd provides equine-assisted activities and therapy for those in need.

Horses “know the language of your emotions without you saying anything,” says Julia Messier, director of communications for the farm. “For veterans, people with substance abuse disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder, they feel like they can’t connect with anybody and that nobody understands them.

“Then they meet this animal that just shoulders that weight of the world for them,” Messier says. “Even if it’s just for a day, they get that incredible connection that they can’t get through anything else.”

The farm is home to two nonprofit organizations,

Story and photos by REBA SALDANHA

Challenge Unlimited and Ironstone Therapy, and a 24-bed retreat center. According to Deedee O’Brien, who retired in 2020 after 37 years as executive director of Challenge Unlimited, the evolution of the farm into an encompassing treatment center was the result of a need from the community.

“I always say it happened to us, not because of us,” she says. “Everything that happened was an answer to the need from the neighborhood and eventually beyond.”

O’Brien met original owner Richard Donovan in the 1970s when boarding her horse at Ironstone. Donovan bought the land in the 1960s to raise and train thoroughbred horses and eventually asked O’Brien to start training the horses with him.

In the summer of 1978, while working with special needs children at the Lowell Recreation Department, O’Brien saw an opportunity to combine her two vocations. One Saturday, about 40 students with a variety of special needs came by bus to Andover to meet the horses.

That day was a catalyst not only for the therapy programs held at the farm today, but also for bringing Special Olympics equestrian sports to Massachusetts in the 1980s.

O’Brien and fellow Ironstone instructor Barbara DeNitto were determined to have their riders feel the benefits of the highly regarded competition. While O’Brien focused her efforts on day-to-day business with the farm, DeNitto devoted herself to the contest.

As a result of her work bringing students to compete both nationally and internationally, DeNitto was inducted into the Special Olympics Hall of Fame. When DeNitto died from cancer in 2010, the Barbara DeNitto Memorial Horse Show was created in her honor and is held at the farm each fall.

On the following pages, we meet four of the riders featured in last October’s show.



An equine therapy rider practices in the arena at Ironstone Farm this summer.



From left, horses Bear, Dinnie, Friar and Freddie stand in their paddock at Ironstone Farm, which was established in 1960 on Lowell Street in Andover to breed, train and rehabilitate horses. The therapeutic programs started 40 years ago.



Hayat Hallee hugs Unico, a Haflinger, following a practice with the BanDittos Drill Team last fall at Ironstone Farm in Andover.



Jenny Landers stands with Desmond, a Dales pony, after performing with the BanDittos Drill Team in the Barbara DeNitto Memorial Horse Show in October.



Meredith Leonard gets to know Saint, a Percheron cross and new addition to Ironstone, during a lesson this spring.

Hayat Hallee

A 2022 BanDittos Drill Team rider who lives in Andover, Hayat Hallee has been riding weekly, sometimes biweekly, and attending summer camps at Ironstone Farm for 10 years.

Nonverbal communication between horse and rider is key to successful treatment for her daughter, Shelley Steenrod says.

Diagnosed with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the 17-year-old also has a speech disorder that can make her difficult to understand.

“Coming to Ironstone Farm was such a gift to her because horses don’t talk,” Steenrod says. “They don’t put any pressure on her, they’re nonjudgmental. It’s all nonverbal, and she flourished.”

Steenrod and her husband, Phil Hallee, adopted Hayat and her younger sister, Fatia, from Ethiopia in 2010.

Ironstone Farm “offers a certain competence” for Hayat, her dad says. “She knows horses better than anyone in the family, and that is a real source of pride for her.”

Hayat is a student at Andover High School and participates in unified basketball and other activities, but the farm’s community of special needs participants really makes her feel at home.

When asked what her favorite part about riding horses is, Hayat says simply: “I am the boss.”

Jenny Landers

Jenny Landers, a 47-year-old Westford resident and 2022 BanDittos Drill Team rider who has been riding at the farm for more than 33 years, earned a bronze medal in the 1995 Special Olympics under the tutelage of DeNitto.

Landers’ sister Lisa Sawyer recalls how DeNitto flew Landers and three other participants to Connecticut to make the trip extra special.

“Barbara loved horses and loved teaching kids with disabilities,” Sawyer says. “She was tough. She expected a lot of (her students), and she didn’t baby them. Her goal was to make them independent no matter what their disability, and I definitely saw that develop in Jenny.”

Sawyer has been driving her sister to her weekly lesson for over 13 years.

“It helps her with her focus and her balance,” Sawyer says. “It’s a challenge for her to take charge of a horse. It’s just not something I can take away from her.”

As an adult with Down syndrome, Landers says that social interactions at the farm are an essential part of her life.

“Fun, friendship and family,” she says. “That’s why I come.”

Meredith Leonard

A two-time Special Olympics medalist, Meredith Leonard was coached by DeNitto for decades. Leonard, 47, of Tewksbury, says that horse riding motivates her to exercise and keeps her relaxed.

“Horses treat everyone the same,” she says. “Everyone here is nice and treats everyone equally.”

Leonard recalls why she started riding at Ironstone over 30 years ago.



Members of the BanDittos Drill Team make their way to the arena to practice their routine for the 2022 Barbara DeNitto Memorial Horse Show.

“I came to see the annual Father’s Day show with my grandmother,” she says. “I saw a blind man jumping (on a horse) and thought if he can do it, so can I.”

She started riding soon after and now also volunteers at the farm, helping care for the horses four days per week, three hours per day.

“It’s good for me to do something for someone else,” says Leonard, who was born with the genetic disorder Apert syndrome.

In the second annual memorial show in 2013, Leonard was presented with the coveted Barbara DeNitto Good Sportsmanship Award.

“It made me cry,” she says. “They didn’t tell me I was going to win. It was an honor. Barbara was always there for me. Bad times, good times, she was always there.”

Jennifer Putnam

Jennifer Putnam, a 2022 BanDittos Drill Team rider from Waltham, was 3 years old in 1986 when she was referred to the farm by Boston Children’s Hospital for equine-assisted physical therapy. Her father chuckles as he recalls O’Brien putting his tiny daughter on a tiny horse called Yankee.

“This is her main thing,” Wade Putnam says. “It has made her more aware of her surroundings, and it is a form of independence for her.”

Students at the farm prepare the horses for their weekly lessons by brushing them, checking their hooves and putting on the saddles.

At the time, Ironstone was the only farm in the area that offered equine-assisted therapy, which meant that Wade was making the one-hour drive through rush-hour traffic from Waltham to Andover weekly. It’s a drive he’s gotten used to over the last 33 years.

“She won’t switch farms. She likes the horses here,” he says with a shrug and a smile. 🐾



Jennifer Putnam poses with Unico after the BanDittos Drill Team’s turn at the Barbara DeNitto Memorial Horse Show.



The BanDittos show off their skills in last year’s memorial show.

