



Photo courtesy of Sunrise Therapeutic Riding and Learning Centre

EQUINE THERAPY for Everyday Health

By E.S.

Karen van der Zalm, executive director of I CAN-T.E.R., and Ann Caine, president of Sunrise Therapeutic Riding and Learning Centre, are well-known leaders and role models in the therapeutic riding community. In interviews with ParaSport® Ontario's Ellie Speck, the two pioneering horse-women shared their passion for inclusive therapeutic, educational and recreational programs for riders with disabilities.

The therapeutic riding community, as Ann states, is appreciative of one another and work together to support each other. Both locations share many similarities when it comes to meeting the needs of their riders and creating a fun experience.

I CAN-T.E.R. was among the first therapeutic riding locations in the Niagara region. Karen has been there for over 25 years. Her program provides individualized learning plans with one-on-one lessons providing fun experiences with a therapeutic result.

Sunrise was founded in 1982 by Caine who is also a founding member of CanTRA (Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association). Ann held presidency twice with CanTRA and is currently the chair of the Accreditation Committee. Sunrise welcomes individuals of all abilities. Sunrise also provides group and individual lessons throughout the year.



Photo courtesy of I CAN-T.E.R.

The primary benefits of therapeutic riding involve physical and psychosocial growth. On the physical benefit spectrum, the rhythm of the horse (a four-beat walking gait that mimics the human gait) demands the body to stabilize, strengthening the upper body and core, and improving respiration and even speech for some.

On the psychosocial side, therapeutic riding can improve social skills. It is also great for self-confidence, emotional control, independence and an overall sense of well-being.

As Ann explains, "Many people have always had people doing things for them – guiding them, showing them, making decisions for them – all their lives, and all of a sudden they are in control of a 1,000-pound horse and they have the reins. It is really a very empowering experience for them!"

A shared focus of the facilities is to include certified instructors as part of their programs. Karen and Ann agree that certified instructors ensure a safe and effective therapeutic riding experience.

Why are certified instructors so important? Instructors certified by CanTRA combine their knowledge of teaching methodologies and communication skills with their understanding of various disabilities. They can effectively manage a team and possess very strong horsemanship backgrounds.

The senior instructor at Sunrise has Coach 1 certification, knows how to train horses for therapy purposes, and is a CanTRA coach. The Sunrise head instructor is a dressage judge who is also very accomplished with her Coach 2 certification. The instructors at I

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“Therapeutic riding really helps improve breath work and respiratory functions to articulate speech.”

– Karen van der Zalm

CAN-T.E.R. have a wide variety of skills and qualifications that include riding, driving, horse handling, teaching, coaching and special education. Programs with certified instructors are also a reassuring asset for the parents of the riders with disabilities.

I CAN-T.E.R. is the only approved site in Ontario offering the Horse Groom Apprenticeship Program in partnership with the Ministry of Labour Training and Skills Development and the Ontario College of Trades. While learning their trade, apprentices provide safe handling, grooming and care for the facility's nine therapy horses. Many of the trainees go on to become I CAN-T.E.R. volunteers, utilizing their new knowledge and skills to safely support participants.

Similarly, Ann holds an annual camp at Sunrise with certified instructors teaching and interacting with the

young riders and their horses. “The instructors do a fantastic job supporting the needs of all participants,” says Ann. The camp is an inclusive one that allows able-bodied youth to learn and play alongside children with disabilities.

So, what's new at I CAN-T.E.R. and Sunrise? I CAN-T.E.R. recently received funding from the David S. Howes Fund Grant through the Niagara Community Foundation to expand its 70 acres of nature trails and provide an outdoor teaching shelter for recreational activities. Karen is thrilled to promote year-round outdoor activities on the new trail which will include trail riding, cart driving, hiking, biking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, sled skiing, orienteering, eco camping and environmental education. “It's all about providing opportunities for increasing wellness benefits that come with being in nature and outdoors.”

The Rotary Club of Font Hill has also provided I CAN-T.E.R. funding, in this case to launch a new program called H.E.Y. (Horse Empowered Youth). Riders will learn about grass maintenance on the property with the use of a horse-drawn grass mower. Other horse-drawn equipment, such as four carts that can attach to different pieces of agricultural gear, has been funded by Wise Guys Charity. These carts, pulled by draft horses, will assist participants in managing small garden plots and maintaining the 87-acre property.

The equipment will also be used for woodlot management and logging in the forested sections of the property. Karen shared her excitement about the new equipment and its preservation of the environment. She explains, "Horses have minimal carbon footprints when they go into forests, so it is beneficial for the environment when they remove fallen trees or logs without the use of a machine." The horse-drawn equipment and recreational miniature horse carting has generated an overwhelming amount of interest for I CAN-T.E.R. and is offered for youth aged 8+ to seniors.

Ann is excited about a brand-new addition to the Equine Assisted Learning Program at Sunrise. Led by Sunrise's senior instructor, it leans toward frontline workers and first responders. The program offers individuals a mental/emotional well-being day. This exceptional opportunity gives hard-working participants an opportunity to be out, in an open space, with fresh air. They get to work with horses while doing team building and leadership activities. The program has a minimum age requirement of 12 years; however, participants meeting this requirement are encouraged to bring their families as well.

A long-standing Sunrise program is the Life Skills Program which acknowledges personal goals and needs for everyone involved. It activates cognitive, emotional, social and physical benefits by providing learning experiences through hands-on activi-

ties. The program engages youth and adults with disabilities and challenges them to reach their fullest potential.

As therapeutic riding continues to gain popularity, how do these facilities work to keep their participants safe? Karen and Ann both take safety precautions to ensure the safety and enjoyment of their riders. They agree that communication is huge between all participants. It is standard in both facilities to support the rider by having one leader and two side walkers as guides. Even though riding horses can be considered high-risk, Karen and Ann ensure that the horses are well trained and socialized. Ann mentions, "We respect them and know what they're giving us, and we appreciate it. It's a two-way street!"

Horses have an amazing way of communicating nonverbally with adults and youth alike. They respond to interactions in ways that humans cannot. Communication happens through their body language, eyes, posture, sounds and movement.

Ann explains that horses that are used for therapeutic purposes are often chosen by breed and temperament. However, horse temperament is often a product of their environment. "They are very intuitive and pick up on human behaviours and mannerisms which is why it is so

important to create a nurturing, safe, and respectful atmosphere." Karen and Ann also know that a therapeutic riding horse can change someone's life.

Karen tells two stories about the same horse, Thunder, which has had quite a meaningful impact on many riders at I CAN-T.E.R. Karen remembers a child with autism who was refusing to put his helmet on. Thunder stomped his foot and continued to stare at this young man until they made eye contact with one another. The boy immediately started laughing as he shared a connection with his horse. He then proceeded to get ready for the lesson.

In another instance with Thunder, there were seniors in wheelchairs passing by. Karen explains that Thunder walked around looking at each participant, stopping in front of a man who was nonverbal. The man had no expression on his face, but Thunder stood in front of him licking his own lips for several minutes to try and make a connection. Karen observes that the most interesting connections are between horses and seniors or individuals on the autism spectrum.

Ann shares two stories that have changed individual lives for the better as well. She explains how there is an autistic, nonverbal rider at Sunrise



Photo courtesy of Sunrise Therapeutic Riding and Learning Centre

who volunteered at a public library. He did not speak to anyone at the library until he got involved in the grooming program at Sunrise. The parents of that young man told Ann what a remarkable difference it made in their family. The young man gained the self-confidence to start speaking and telling people at the library all about Sunrise's programs.

Ann also highlighted the progression of a three-year-old boy with no muscular strength. When he first started at Sunrise he could not hold his body erect. Two to three years later, Ann saw him walking across the parking lot holding his dad's hand. The father said to Ann that he has never seen his son have fun while doing any other therapy. He also add-

ed that there was nothing like riding therapy that has given his son the courage to want to stand and walk.

Ann explains that all parents want to see their child develop like any other. "Parents form their own sense of community through watching their children have fun while participating in therapeutic work. Therapeutic riding brings families together and encourages a celebration of growth."

Has the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic affected these programs? Both have experienced a devastating impact. I CAN-T.E.R. is operating at a much lower capacity and is doing everything possible to generate the revenue needed to support programming. Programs were shut down entirely and its major funding stream for horse care was cut. But, the community rallied to support I CAN-T.E.R. with a Buy a Bale of Hay Fundraiser to supply hay for the year for the therapy horses. Currently, the facility is only able to safely run therapy programs at about 20% capacity. Heading into winter, the annual Helping Horseshoes Pledge Drive was accepting charitable donations at www.icanter.ca.

At Sunrise, most of the programs have been put on hold as only 20 of the 120 riders with disabilities have been able to return. Only 20 riders can mount a horse independently. Sunrise is experiencing the same financial challenges with respect to the care of the therapy horses, and would welcome support at www.icanter.ca/donate-now or <https://sunrise-therapeutic.ca/support-opportunities>.

About the Author: *Ellie Speck began horseback riding at five years of age. She has had the opportunity to coach, part-board, and compete for over 15 years. "Horses and people share a remarkable bond through body language and emotion," she says. "They can sense how someone is feeling and the vulnerability of that person." Her relationships with horses have helped her overcome some of her own life's challenges for which she is grateful.*



Photo courtesy of I CAN-T.E.R.