

## **BETTING ON CREATING BONDS**

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The Intelligencer

A new Special Equestrians program will pair at-risk teens with injured racehorses.

The staff at Special Equestrians wasn't sure how a former racehorse would react to life away from the track. But Goodman's Girl, a 5-year-old thoroughbred who raced 21 times before injuring her leg, was resting comfortably in her new stall and munching on some hay within hours of her arrival in Warrington on Tuesday afternoon.

"She's a little trooper," said Special Equestrians executive director Tammy Westney.

This fall, the therapeutic horse-riding nonprofit is partnering with Turning For Home, Inc., Philadelphia Park Racetrack's racehorse retirement program, to host two racehorses with career-ending injuries. Goodman's Girl will be joined in a few weeks by another, older thoroughbred named El Frio. The duo will be part of the Special Equestrians Youth Connections program, teaching empathy and practical skills to students with behavioral or academic problems.

The horses may also inspire physically handicapped children who take part in Special Equestrians programs, said Barbara Luna, program administrator for Turning For Home, which is sponsored by the owners, trainers and jockeys at Philadelphia Park. Connections are possible, Luna said – pairing a child who can't walk well with a horse who can't, either; or seeing a thoroughbred cooped up in a stall, much like being cooped up in a hospital bed.

"We're hoping that the children will find something in common with them," she said.

Mitchell Lee, a behavior support team leader for the Lakeside School, has signed up students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and emotional disorders for Youth Connections for a second time this fall. Last year's trips sparked a big reaction, he said. Some kids had never seen a horse, and students who rarely

make connections with "outsiders" were asking about volunteer opportunities by the end of the program.

"The impact is definitely a powerful one," Lee said.

For participating alternative schools with attendance problems, the Youth Connections program works as an incentive – the first four or so students who arrive at school and sign up get to participate in that day's activities, Westney said. Of roughly 20 middle- and high-school-aged students from three Bucks and Montgomery County alternative schools, half will be teamed up with the thoroughbreds and half will work with other horses. Special Equestrians will measure absence rates for both groups at the end of the winter session to see whether working with race horses offers better than usual results, Westney said.

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Scholarships have been secured for Youth Connections students, though the nonprofit is still seeking sponsorships to cover the \$450 monthly cost of boarding and caring for each racehorse.

During their time in Warrington, Goodman's Girl and El Frio won't be going for rides – or, really, doing much of anything, said Special Equestrians program director Anne Reynolds. They'll keep a low profile until they are well-attuned to their new surroundings.

Once the new horses are acclimated, the kids will learn about their backgrounds, as well as how to feed them, groom them and maintain the facilities.

The race horse stalls will be decorated with their ribbons, pictures from past races and other mementos to offer a glimpse of their histories. Neither Goodman's Girl or El Frio are likely to race again, Special Equestrians staff said; whether they can be ridden again will be determined after some therapy.

Turning for Home was created in 2008, around the same time as a no-tolerance policy for trainers who sold their horses to auction, where many are then sold for slaughter. In a year and a half, the program has taken in 278 horses, coming in at a rate of around four per week. The horses eventually will be sent to the South Jersey Thoroughbred Rescue & Adoption in Medford, N.J.

Once El Frio and Goodman's Girl have been rehabilitated and readied for a trip to South Jersey, Luna said the program may send a few more horses to Warrington.

"Racing is a humane business. We do take care of our own," Luna said.