

## LIFE SEEMS LESS CHALLENGING ONCE KIDS CLIMB ABOARD THE PEGASUS PROGRAM

By Meghan Lewit  
STAFF WRITER

"Hi mommy ... you gotta see this!" Anna Hanley cries out from atop the saddle of her small brown horse to her mother, Susan, who is waving enthusiastically from behind the fence.

Nine-year-old Anna is a spastic quadriplegic, meaning that all four of her limbs are paralyzed, and rarely sees the world from a perspective outside of her electrified wheelchair. But for about 30 minutes each week, the girl with wavy brown hair and a disarming smile looks down from the top of the world and feels the legs beneath her move, even if they're not her own.

It's a family affair on Saturdays at the Pegasus Riding Academy for the Handicapped, which sits on 1½ acres of wide-open land in Palm Desert. Anna rides each week with her three adopted sisters: Lara, 11; Ashley, 9; and Mariah, 6.

"They never miss it," Susan said. "If the horses are running, the kids are here."

The Hanley sisters are joyful girls in matching Disney sweatshirts with their hair pulled back into ponytails. They're all smiles from the moment they get out of the car, and Ashley and Lara bound up and down with the kind of energy that can only be generated by a beautiful Saturday morning that promises horseback rides and, later, maybe a trip to the zoo.

It's easy to forget about the challenges the family faces each day. The oldest, Lara, is schizophrenic and cognitively delayed, meaning her IQ is well below average. Ashley, who is Lara's natural sister, is also cognitively challenged. Mariah has glaucoma and is 99 percent blind. She also suffers from William's Syndrome, a rare disease characterized by a heart abnormality that will, at some point, be terminal, Susan said.

Susan, 64, who cares for all four of her adopted children with just the help of a part-time caretaker, says the same thing now she once told her own mother: "If God makes them, I can take of them."

Susan worked in special education for 15 years in Los Angeles County, and over the course of 10 years, she provided a home for at least 20 "medically fragile" children. The four girls were all her foster children before she adopted them, and all came from abusive homes, she said.

The family now lives in Rancho Mirage, not far from Susan's natural son and her four grandchildren in Palm Desert. The girls go to school, take dance classes and lead normal lives.

"What they are is just really happy kids," Susan said.

Mariah, the last to be brought to the Hanley home, laughs as Pegasus volunteers smile her on top of her small pony, Smokey.

"Who's a pretty girl?" her mother asks. "Mariah!" she answers, clapping her hands for emphasis.

One volunteer leads each horse in loops around the ring, while two others walk on either side, making sure the children are supported. Pegasus President Lori Sarner stands in the middle of the ring calling out instructions like "raise arms in an airplane," or "put a hand up and wave."

The girls take turns dunking balls into a basket and putting rings on a pole, and, at one point, the horses spin around in a circle during an exercise called "merry go round."

Ashley, seated on her mare, Champagne, said her favorite part of the lesson is "kick-keelball and standing up in the saddle and doing the circle."

The Hanleys are among the approximately 120 children and adults who participate in the 30-minute classes held Wednesdays through Saturdays at Pegasus. Many local schools and organizations such as the

Foundation for the Retarded come to the sprawling property at the end of Cook Street during the week, and parents and caretakers will often come with their children on Saturdays, Sarner said.

Sarner, an avid horsewoman and advocate for the handicapped, took over the small, struggling nonprofit organization 15 years ago and turned it into a desert institution with 17 horses, a full-time stable manager and 90 local volunteers.

For people with disabilities, equine therapy works muscles that are rarely used and helps the riders with their balance. But the emotional benefits are just as important, Sarner said.

The movement of the horses is "the closest thing in nature to human walking," she said. "All of sudden (riders) go from being a little person to sitting big on the horse. ... It gives a sense of empowerment for people who are impaired."

For Anna Hanley, who has no upper body control, riding horses helps with her motor skills, but "every kid gets something from the motion," Susan said.

For information on Pegasus, call (760) 772-3057 or visit [pegasusridingacademy.org](http://pegasusridingacademy.org).



Mariah Hanley, who is 99 percent blind, holds onto the hand of volunteer Dolores Larrigan of Lono during her ride.

*"What they are is just really happy kids."*

Susan Hanley



Volunteers, from left, Mary Matava of Rancho Mirage, Chase Berko of Palm Springs, Larry Patton of Palm Desert and Joe Vaccok of Palm Springs assist Anna Hanley in getting aboard Smokey at the Pegasus Riding Academy.