

Victoria Nodiff-Netanel: Her horses gallop to the emotional rescue

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Photo by Carla Acevedo-Blumenkrantz

Victoria Nodiff-Netanel recently led two of her miniature horses into a courtyard at the Los Angeles Ronald McDonald House, where families of seriously ill children stay free or at low cost while the children receive treatment at local hospitals. The residents eagerly gathered to pet Blue Moon and Liberty Belle — who stood about 27 inches tall, their manes adorned with festive braids and purple bows.

The children included an 8-year-old Mexican boy who has cerebral palsy and hydrocephalus; a 6-year-old Palestinian girl whose leg was blown off by an explosion in the Gaza Strip; and 11-year-old Eric, whose hair was just starting to grow back after 50 days of grueling radiation therapy for his recurring brain tumor.

The little horses reared up for the delighted children, played a keyboard with their muzzles and lifted their hooves to give a high-five. Children in wheelchairs walked the horses on a double leash with Nodiff-Netanel. “That makes them feel empowered,” she said.

“It brings these children a lot of comfort to be able to pet, cuddle, walk and brush these horses,” she added. “It really helps them get their minds off the tough times and radical procedures and treatments they’re going through.”

Julee Brooks, executive director of the Los Angeles Ronald McDonald House, said, “It’s a very important part of the healing process.”

Nodiff-Netanel grew up in a Reform Jewish family in the Los Angeles area from the age of 12, and has loved horses since she was a young girl. She went on to become an accomplished horsewoman who competed in the equestrian sport of dressage for years.

In 2008, she purchased her first of seven miniature horses and, discovering how trainable they are, got them certified as equine therapy horses “to give back to the community” through a nonprofit charity she founded, Mini Therapy Horses (minitherapyhorses.com). It now reaches more than 50,000 people per year, bringing comfort to traumatized war veterans, at-risk youth, child rape victims, patients in locked-down psychiatric wards, survivors of the mass shooting in San Bernardino, children at the Maryvale orphanage in Rosemead and others.

As a civilian volunteer with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department and the L.A. Mayor’s Crisis Response Team, Nodiff-Netanel is on call 24/7 to visit children who have been pulled out of abusive homes or witnessed a murder or suicide. The children sometimes talk to and confide in the horses.

Nodiff-Netanel recalled how one small boy was hesitant to pet her horse Willow because he was afraid he might hurt her, thinking the dark dappling patterns on Willow’s hide were bruises.

Her horses also provided solace to a Russian family that was severely shaken after a transient stabbed the father in Hollywood last year.

Spurred by news stories about Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans with brain injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder, Nodiff-Netanel began working with patients at local veterans hospitals.

With the help of her organization’s co-director, Steve Sullivan, a reserve sheriff’s deputy, she engages in an intensive training process for her animals. “We desensitize them to loud noises, vehicles, to being touched and having walkers or wheelchairs bump into them,” she said.

As Eric gently petted Blue Moon on a recent morning, his mother, Wendy, said interacting with the animals brings him some relief in between his radiation treatments.

“The horses help people achieve a giant shift in their emotional well-being,” Nodiff-Netanel said. “It helps to get them out of that dark place of pain.”

The horsewoman regards her work as a *mitzvah*. “I’m on a mission to help people,” she said, “and that’s very much a part of the Jewish culture.”