



ELIZABETH SAGARIN

Lisa Gatti founded Pal-O-Mine Equestrian with a borrowed horse and 10 students. Now she has 25 horses, including King, on the group's Islandia campus and 400 students.

Healing with *horsepower*

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

Lisa Gatti said she loved horses from the time she started riding at age 7. She also knew from a young age that she wanted to be a special-education teacher like her mother. But it wasn't until she read the Danielle Steel novel "Palomino" in 1985 that she had a vision for how those two passions could merge. In the book the main character becomes confined to a wheel-

chair after a fall from a horse and decides to open a ranch for children with disabilities.

That's when fiction met reality.

"I called my father at 2 a.m. from college and told him I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I wanted to provide equine therapy to kids with disabilities," recalled

Gatti, 58. "He asked me if I had been drinking."

In 1993, while working as a high school special education teacher for Nassau BOCES, she pitched the idea of a therapeutic riding program for kids with disabilities at The Red Barn, a boarding, lesson and training facility in Old Brookville. She said she began

with one borrowed horse, one volunteer and 10 students to offer adaptive riding lessons to help them develop riding skills, as well as balance, focus, self-discipline, patience and responsibility. The response from parents and students was so positive, she said, that within two years she had 30 students and riders from group

Pal-O-Mine celebrates 30 years of equine therapy for people with special needs

homes with a range of disabilities.

So in 1995, she founded the nonprofit Pal-O-Mine Equestrian, a therapeutic horseback riding program for individuals with disabilities and other vulnerable populations.

Today, 30 years later, Pal-O-Mine — named for the Steel novel that inspired it — serves more than 400 students each week at a 13-acre Islandia campus with 25 specially trained horses, Gatti said. Pal-O-Mine

See THERAPY on E18



Lisa Gatti with Maryellen King, far left, who was one of Gatti's first students and still gets horseback therapy at Pal-O-Mine. Above, a hoist is used to help King mount Pecan.

'Horses can teach anybody'

THERAPY from E17

operates 365 days a year with staff including mental health professionals, riding instructors, equine specialists, occupational and speech therapists, teachers, vocational coaches and 85 weekly volunteers. Gatti, the CEO, said that program fees are supplemented with grants, individual donations, corporate sponsors and events bringing Pal-O-Mine's budget to \$2.4 million annually.

"We provide a comprehensive therapeutic equine

program to facilitate growth, learning and healing for children and adults with disabilities, survivors of trauma, veterans, first responders, individuals on the autism spectrum, people with mental health challenges and many others," Gatti said.

To make it happen, Gatti first drew on her experiences when she was just 24 and teaching at-risk students at Nassau BOCES.

In 1994, she took her high school students to her new Red Barn Therapeutic program to work with children. "The at-risk students were my

first volunteers, and it taught them everything there was to know about empathy, compassion, respect and punctuality," she said. "These were at-risk kids [who were] working with kids with physical and cognitive disabilities using the horses, but they were just kids to me, and horses can teach anybody."

Among her first students in 1993 was Maryellen King, now 60, of East Meadow. King, who wrote in an email that she was born with spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, which affected all her limbs, eyesight and hearing, said her mother "read





Shannon Barry, 28, of Stony Brook, rides King on Pal-O-Mine's 13-acre campus in Islandia.



Marissa Rachlin, who has a traumatic brain injury, rides around the property and does exercises guided by Eve Rubino, left, and Elise Hammell. Rachlin, 41, started riding at Pal-O-Mine when she was 10.

a Newsday article about a woman who was trying to establish a riding program for people with disabilities to discover what a horse can do for them."

King still rides at Pal-O-Mine. "I made some of the best friends, both equine and human," she wrote. "Just like humans, horses can teach you some of the most important things ... such as understanding and kindness. It helped improve my core balance, leg control and fine motor control. In addition to the physical benefits it has helped me through many dark times."

A HOME IN ISLANDIA

As Pal-O-Mine gained more students and horses, Gatti said she had to move to bigger facilities six times in 10 years. Then in 2004 she leased her current property in Islandia from Computer Associates — it was used as a summer program for employees' children — and she bought the property from the company in 2007. She has since expanded to 13 acres with a 20-stall barn, a 100-by-120-foot indoor arena with a rider-hoisting system, three outdoor riding arenas, classrooms, an accessible playground, a greenhouse and a wellness center. There are

also other farm animals like chickens, sheep and donkeys used in the program. Gatti lives on the grounds with her family. A package of four private lessons cost about \$300, but Gatti said she does not turn away clients due to inability to pay.

The operation had wrangled with the Village of Islandia over land use issues and the village at one point considered taking the property through eminent domain, Newsday has previously reported. The Suffolk County Legislature added the farm to the county's agricultural district in 2021, essentially

settling the matter in Pal-O-Mine's favor. "The Village of Islandia has been a great partner with Pal-O-Mine since then," Gatti said.

People who come to Pal-O-Mine engage with the horses — among them Pecan, Honey, King, Ella and Goliath. Gatti said they are "therapy partners" along with specially trained social workers, riding instructors, equine therapies, speech and occupational therapists and other team members. She recruits horses from all over the United States that face an intense three-month trial period "and only 1 out of 10 make it because not all are appropriate for the program."

"It takes a special type of horse," she said. "They have to be patient and forgiving and stand still for long periods of time during OT and speech therapy."

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Pal-O-Mine has expanded to include a welding program, new initiatives for Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers and another for cancer survivors. There is also a vocational training program called Job Security Through Equine Partnership, or J-STEP, which allows many Pal-O-Mine students to apply for a vocational internship after they age out of high school, Gatti said. The interns learn how to run a profitable business by selling their own handmade artisan crafts and running a Community Supported Agriculture program using the flowers they grow in their own gardens. The program brings in \$40,000 annually from their efforts.

Among the J-STEP employees is Timothy McEnroe, 32, of Babylon, who began riding at Pal-O-Mine when he was 12. He said he began in J-Step in 2011 for his first summer job.

"Our job coaches taught us how important it is to be on time, be responsible, teamwork and to be respectful of others," said McEnroe, who has autism. "J-STEP has been very important to me for learning life skills, but Pal-O-Mine has also been very important for me to meet people and make friends. It started out for me as a wonderful place to be as a 12-year-old child, and now Pal-O-Mine has grown, as I have grown, into an amazing place for a young man."

That's exactly what Gatti said she had hoped for her students.

"Some speak their first words, or walk for the first time, at Pal-O-Mine," Gatti said. "And individuals in wheelchairs

experience a unique sense of freedom while riding."

Gatti said she's now concentrating on adding programs, which doesn't surprise Lori Sorensen, 56, of Ronkonkoma. She said she has known Gatti since they rode horses at the same Dix Hills barn as children. Sorensen was the one who recommended that Gatti propose her therapeutic program at The Red Barn.

"I can't believe what she's built," said Sorensen, who volunteers as a job coach for the J-STEP program. "There's always something going on at Pal-O-Mine, and I feel like the busier we are, the happier Lisa is. She never wants to stop growing because she says there's always more to do and she can always help more people."

RIPPLE EFFECT

That energy spreads to the board and other volunteers, said Ellen Lear, 79, a clinical social worker and equine specialist who has been a Pal-O-Mine board member for 12 years. "This is a happy place where progress is made. Everybody's there to support the mission, to support Lisa," said the Hauppauge resident. "Lisa is encouraging of people's strengths and helps them to build them. She is also the most positive person. Even when we're going to have an event and it's scheduled to 90% chance of rain, she can be positive about that."

Howard Rachlin, 75, said his daughter Marissa, 41, who has a traumatic brain injury and physical limitations, started riding at Pal-O-Mine when she was 10. He said that Gatti and her program gave his daughter the self-confidence to ride and compete at regional competitions.

"Lisa is full of energy, and there's no way she cannot get a kid motivated," he said. "She's a great inspiration to them and gets them to do the best that they can do."

Gatti said she's never looked at Pal-O-Mine as work. "I cannot wait to get here every day. My vision of wanting to teach kids with disabilities has had such a tremendous ripple effect that I never saw coming because Pal-O-Mine has significantly changed people's lives."

As for her original inspiration, Gatti said she's written to Steel over the years, updating her on how Pal-O-Mine has grown. Steel never responded — until this year when Gatti said she received an email congratulating her on 30 years in business.