

# Discovering the Power of Horses

Local News

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In a world where stress and uncertainty are becoming more prevalent, it's important to find ways to cope and overcome personal challenges. That's where Riding for the Disabled (RDA) Causeway Coast and Glens comes in.

This amazing volunteer-led charity is dedicated to helping those with disabilities, both physical and psychological, build life skills and find hope.

The RDA, based at Castleroe Road, Coleraine and established in 1975, has seen a massive increase in referrals for anxiety, depression, isolation and loneliness, much of which has stemmed from the Covid-19 pandemic.

"We've got kids and young people dealing with a range of issues, and traditional methods just aren't cutting it and that's where the RDA comes in," explained Chairperson, Gail Wilson-Downey.

"The RDA has historically been focussed on making horses and horse-riding accessible to people with disabilities, and that is still at the heart of what we do. However, we now help even more people who are struggling with a whole new range of difficulties."

Gail and her colleagues, Christine Hankin and Frankie Creith, are now qualified to deliver equine-assisted learning and therapy through their recent accreditation from the Athena Herd Foundation.

"We're not doctors, we're equine specialists and facilitators," says Gail. "We use the silent language of the horse as a metaphor to help people find their own solutions in a safe and empowering space. Horses are incredible creatures and have a way of touching the lives of those who need it most."

The RDA is working with the NHS to help even more people and has a referral pathway with the local Multi Disciplinary Team in the Health Service. They're also running an accredited BHS (British Horse Society) program called 'Changing Lives with Horses' that covers key educational topics.

Weighing hay nets instead of doing maths problems and describing a horse's mood instead of writing an essay is the innovative approach taken with this programme, making learning fun and meaningful for all.

Diversity is the name of the game at the RDA Causeway Coast and Glens. With kids from all walks of life and a variety of needs, the RDA is open to anyone who could benefit from the love and wisdom a horse has to offer.

"It's different for everyone, but people come here and feel safe," said Gail. "There's no judgement, they get to know the horses, work with them, and the horses provide instant feedback."

One mum explained the difference RDA Causeway Coast and Glens has made to her daughter Sarah.\*\*

"As a mother, watching your child struggle with anxiety is a heart-wrenching experience.

"For Sarah, the global pandemic only heightened her struggles making it even more difficult for her to cope with life's challenges. That's why I was overjoyed when Sarah found the 'Changing Lives through Horses' programme at the RDA centre in Coleraine.

"Since joining the program in September 2022, I have seen a whole new side to Sarah. She looks forward to her weekly sessions with excitement and speaks fondly of the horses she has worked with and her coach, Gail.

"Sarah has formed such a special bond with both the horses and Gail, who has a nurturing personality that makes her feel welcome and cared for.

"Sarah has been fully immersed in the program, participating in all aspects of horse care, from cleaning stables to feeding and grooming the horses, to leading them and eventually riding them.

"This structured and calming environment has had a profound impact on her everyday life. She now approaches challenges with a much calmer demeanour and has grown in confidence, even tackling her schoolwork with a newfound assurance.

"I believe that the program has provided Sarah with the tools she needs to address her fears and anxieties, and I am so grateful for the positive impact it has had on her life.

"As the sessions come to a close, I am hopeful that Sarah will continue to use what she has learned in her day-to-day life and even consider volunteering at the RDA centre.

"With the skills and support she has gained from this program, I am confident that she can face anything life throws her way."

As RDA Causeway Coast and Glens are currently on a drive seeking volunteers, Gail Wilson-Downey summed up why you should consider giving up some of your spare time for this fantastic charity.

"You will be making a positive impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities, both physical and psychological, whilst experiencing the transformative power of horses," she said.

"Horses have a magical ability to empower and bring resilience to those who need it most. And none of this would be possible without the tireless efforts of dedicated volunteers and the generosity of every individual who makes a donation to the charity."

You can help the RDA Causeway Coast and Glens continue its amazing work by donating, sponsoring a horse, or even volunteering.

What are you waiting for - the power of horses is waiting for you!

Contact Gail or Christine at [gailwd67@gmail.com](mailto:gailwd67@gmail.com) or [christinebt52@gmail.com](mailto:christinebt52@gmail.com).



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