



Bradbourne Group Riding for the Disabled Association, incorporating Carriage Driving

Charity no 1122480

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Volunteer Stories

I first went to Bradbourne 9 years ago, I was astonished by what I saw there. It wasn't just the helping people with problems, but the creation of an environment where the people were encouraged to achieve and do things they probably had no idea they could do.

I began volunteering for the Sevenoaks RDA approximately six years ago, after a period of ill health for myself. I wanted to focus on something of value and something that I passionately believed in. The instructors that I met at Sevenoaks were completely inspirational people who welcomed me warmly to the group. The benefit that the adult and child riders gain from their lessons with the ponies are immediately obvious - their bodies relax, they move more easily, they forget about their day to day problems and they smile! Focussing on other people and their problems helps me to forget about my own difficult issues. I have made strong friendships with some of the other volunteers and both my physical and mental health have improved through my involvement with Sevenoaks RDA.

I was reading an article by a psychologist about being happy. He said that people mainly think that pleasure is the route to happiness; but in fact it is the people who find a purpose to their lives that are happiest. Volunteering was listed as a key way to provide purpose. It struck me that volunteering at RDA has the best of everything – bringing pleasure to the volunteer and the clients whilst giving a vital purpose in what you do.

As a lifelong horse lover, and lapsed rider/horse owner, I get a regular 'fix' working with our great ponies. They make sure you appreciate them as individuals . . . and that leads me to the main reason why I volunteer with RDA - our riders.

When I retired from teaching, I left behind many young people who I hoped appreciated my efforts to improve their understanding of Science. Now I know so many riders of all ages who really do appreciate my helping them to ride their pony. They may not say so in so many words, but 'high fives' and a big smile after a cold muddy ride are quite enough.

In addition I've been lucky to work with many young riders who want to learn more about caring for horses through the ASDAN scheme supported by RDA National. It's been a joy to see these riders develop confidence in grooming, feeding, mucking out and tacking up. They have achieved awards and experience which all of us can celebrate.

Finally, I have many great new friends. RDA volunteers always have a common bond, which makes us special, even if our families don't always get the message!!

At Bradbourne RDA we deal with a huge range of clients from small children to senior citizens, with again full ranges of physical and learning disabilities, as well as people with psychological and emotional problems (this last category becoming more predominant in young adults struggling to cope with the modern, complex, wired world we live in). All are treated in exactly the same way, without judging and with huge sensitivity and respect. This reflects the whole culture of the Group and the way volunteers themselves behave to each other as well as to the clients, which I believe is why there is such enthusiasm, passion and commitment within the Group.

Three years ago I was suffering from drug resistant depression resulting in nine months in Bethlem Royal Hospital. RDA Bradbourne and the riders and helpers were always supporting me; giving me a reason to get up in the morning. I feel that RDA helped me an enormous amount and has enabled me to resume a normal life and to continue to meet friends and of course the wonderful ponies.

The Bradbourne RDA Group is run entirely by volunteers with no paid staff and I firmly believe this creates something very special in which the volunteers themselves can flourish, as well as the clients.

I retired from BT in July 2014 after 43 years in the business and I always wanted to do volunteer work, but work pressures never allowed me the time. Now with time on my hands I am putting my skills and resources back into voluntary work. I am a volunteer for 3 organisations - Demelza Children's Hospice in Sittingbourne, an IT Buddy for my local library and Bradbourne RDA as a Wednesday morning helper.

What I have seen in my short time at Bradbourne has given me great pleasure, that Bradbourne has wonderful facilities to give everyone who comes to ride or help out the chance to succeed. I have certainly learnt new skills, such as horse management, ensuring that the ponies are ready for the first morning's ride, which is very important for the riders young or old who are less tolerant of having to wait. I have also re-used my skills that I have taken with me from working in a large business enabling to communicate effectively to my rider whom I am leading.

Volunteering at Bradbourne is on my long term strategy and not to forget what a great bunch of volunteers Bradbourne RDA has.

I volunteer at Bradbourne 2 days each week, the other 3 days I am engaged in paid employment. I often tell people that, if I need to make say a dentist or optician appointment I will always make sure it is during my paid employment. For me, the things I do in paid employment can almost always be done the next day; but I know absolutely that if the volunteers are not on-site at Bradbourne the rides cannot take place.

Having had a busy business life establishing a graphic design consultancy in London then running a paper agency with my husband I stepped back from commercial life when we sold the agency. I decided to pursue a lifelong passion for making things and went to university to take a City & Guilds qualification in upholstery and set up as an upholsterer (as much for pleasure as profit).

The Olympic Games in 2012 was an inspiration and a visit to the Paralympic equestrian event reminded me of my horsey childhood dreams. My sports scientist daughter had been training a disabled athlete for the UK basketball team and she encouraged me to explore how I could get involved as a volunteer. As a keen rider and gymkhana competitor in my distant youth I started to think how I could contribute in a small way and the RDA really appealed.

I strongly believe in 'putting something back' and the RDA has provided me with the perfect opportunity to do this. It is really enjoyable meeting all our riders and working with the ponies and my upholstery skills have come in handy for repairing the ponies rugs. I have complete admiration for the dedication and commitment of our instructors and fellow volunteers, many of whom have been at Bradbourne for many years

Riding was always important to my father and Bradbourne was where it all started, with his first riding lessons in the 1960's

When my father retired, he became an extremely keen rider, and regularly rode around the Kent countryside. I would often accompany him and we became close, enjoying many rides together. He enjoyed riding at speed and I remember a few hair-raising moments!

At 70, he had to give this up when he developed a heart condition and we all thought he would never ride again. This was not a problem at first as he had many other interests but when he developed Alzheimer's it became increasingly difficult to find activities to occupy his time. As his dementia progressed he rapidly lost independence, could only walk short distances, found socialising difficult as he failed to recognise friends, even at times my mother and myself. He was frustrated and distressed at his deteriorating condition. My mother and I were concerned he was becoming depressed. Yet he had so much energy!

I had been a volunteer at Bradbourne for more than a year when I suggested he might like to take up riding again, this time as a disabled rider. He took a little convincing at first as he had not considered himself to be disabled!

But at the same time he was worried how a rider with dementia might be treated. I tried to reassure him that, like all riders at Bradbourne, he would be treated with sensitivity and respect. I also realised that although keen to ride again, he was extremely nervous.

Fortunately, he loved his first ride at Bradbourne and I took pleasure in watching his enjoyment. He looked forward to his Friday rides as the high point in his week. My mother and I enjoyed chatting to him about them afterwards. He said how pleased he was to have contact with horses again especially as he had previously thought his riding days were over.

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He liked the fact that the physical and mental effort involved in staying on board gave him no time to worry about anything else.

With encouragement from the instructors and helpers he gradually gained confidence.

He continued to ride until two weeks before he died. His death from heart failure came sooner than expected but my mother and I felt that my father had been fortunate to find enjoyment in the last months of his life.

I also appreciated that we had become closer once again through riding.

Watching my father ride at Bradbourne gave me valuable insights as to how other riders and their relatives experience RDA. I am now more aware of some of the anxieties they face. But I am also extremely grateful to the special supportive atmosphere that makes RDA at Bradbourne so rewarding to riders, their relatives and the volunteers.