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Horses Inspire **Reading**

By Michele Hudson

The **Black Stallion Literacy Foundation** leads kids down a path to reading success.

“When I was a kid, I wasn’t a good reader. It was very difficult for me,” admits **Terry A. Brewer**, a resident of **Lake Mary** and a 23-year-veteran of the Orange County Sheriff’s Office Mounted Unit.

Growing up on a prestigious horse farm in Kentucky, Brewer learned to ride a horse at age 4 and was exposed to drawing and painting as a youngster, but was not encouraged to delve into books. A former schoolteacher, Brewer now blends his love of learning with horsemanship to inspire elementary school children to read.

In partnership with the Black Stallion Literacy Foundation, a nonprofit organization that serves schools

locally and nationwide, Brewer and other deputies from Orange County’s Mounted Unit introduce children to reading using the enchantment of horses.

Reading Groundwork

Through hands-on “touches” with horses, games, curriculum and books that children get to keep, the Black Stallion Literacy Foundation lays the groundwork for a lifelong love of reading, says **Vicki Anderson**, program coordinator. Walter Farley’s book, “The Black Stallion,” is given to fourth graders, and two books from the Little Black Pony series are given to first graders.

“When these kids learn how to read and become better educated, there is less chance of them getting into

trouble on the streets. They have a better future in store for them,” says Brewer.

Anderson believes that children exposed to police officers in this positive setting develop a respect for law enforcement that they carry with them in later years. After participating in the Black Stallion program, schools with lower reading scores boosted achievement, according to Anderson. “Both teachers and kids love it,” she says.

College Park resident and Orange County teacher **Giselle Stapleton** heads up the first grade program at Princeton Elementary. “I told the kids [that] they get to keep two books, the police officer is going to come [and] they can pet the horse. My whole class cheered—they were so excited.”

A field trip to the Clarcona Horseman’s Park in Apopka offers a “second touch” where children get an up-close look at horses, learn about their care and feeding and later receive their second book. This reinforces the curriculum and keeps first graders motivated to continue reading.

Stapleton says the Little Black Pony books are now linked to Princeton’s accelerated reading program so kids can take a computerized test and win prizes. “The children realize they can read a longer book, and it builds self-esteem, kind of like getting their feet wet,” she says.



Members of the Orange County Sheriff’s Office Mounted Unit introduce kids to their horses to make reading more fun.



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Set in Solid Curriculum

To promote the joy of reading and improve comprehension, fourth grade students receive “The Black Stallion” novel, allowing them to make one of the most important steps in education: transitioning to a chapter book. Curriculum provided to teachers enriches the program, as well as exciting student perks such as seeing the Frances Ford Coppola movie “The Black Stallion” and a live equitheater performance at Arabian Nights in Kissimmee, featuring a black stallion.

Experiencing the wonders of imagination through the magic of horses is a concept birthed in 1999 by **Mark Miller**, owner of Arabian Nights, and Tim Farley, son of the late Walter Farley. Their belief? Children who learn to read succeed; children who don’t fail both in school and in life.

The Black Stallion Literacy Foundation relies on financial gifts to help fund the program. “Horse enthusiasts, Walter Farley fans and those who believe literacy begins with literature are among supporters,” says Anderson. A portion of the fee is also borne by the schools. Individuals or businesses can sponsor a student, classroom or a school to help in the fight against illiteracy.

An estimated 20 percent of adults read at or below a fifth-grade level and are at risk for being underemployed, according to the National Institute for Literacy. With more than 40 million Americans age 16 and older challenged by significant literacy needs, one thing remains clear: reaching kids early is key. Teaching and touching young minds through the power of horses and imagination offers one winning combination. **L**

Program coordinator Vicki Anderson says teachers love the Black Stallion literacy program as much as the kids who get a close-up look at horses.

Find out how you can help the Black Stallion Literacy Foundation on our Web site at CentralFlorida-Lifestyle.com.