

# Reining in Excellence

A farm and ranch program in Los Angeles is helping underserved teens gallop toward greatness.

BY CHRISTINA PFENNING CRAIG

Girls develop life skills through riding and caring for horses (above and below) at a Los Angeles ranch founded by Debra Avery and Judith Hopkins (shown far left and center in photo at right).



Debra Avery has been a horse lover since she was a girl in San Diego. Her family couldn't afford a steed of its own, so Debra borrowed rides at the local equestrian center, gaining the confidence only found atop a horse. Years later, she married into an equally equine-crazed family and fell in love with a black-and-white American Paint Horse named Skunk on her father-in-law's ranch in central California.

Debra remembered those early days, and the lessons she learned with the mares and ponies at the riding center, and wanted to help other young

women reap the benefits of connecting with horses.

"I always wanted to run a horse program for girls like me," says Debra. "I wanted to help girls gain the courage to be around a horse and to care for a horse."

Serendipity struck one day at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center as Debra trotted Skunk beside fellow rider Judith Hopkins. Debra mentioned an inheritance from her father-in-law and her desire to use it to serve underprivileged girls. Judith had the same dream—and a name for the organization.

They founded Taking the Reins (TTR) in 1998. Today it occupies 2½ acres along the Los Angeles River, just minutes away from the Hollywood sign and Dodger Stadium. The organization serves more than 400 young women per year in after-school, weekend and summer programs that feature horse riding and care, gardening and even competitive horse showing. Most participants live below the poverty line and often have not had reliable housing for more than six months at a time.

Few have previous horse experience.

Modeled after 4-H's six pillars of character, TTR uses farm and ranch experiences to teach its own four pillars of development: responsibility, leadership, teamwork and self-confidence. Says Executive Director Dr. Jane Haven, "A large number of our girls are on the autism spectrum. I can't count how many of them have found their first social friends due to sharing this hobby and activity. Horses bring them out in such a wonderful way."

Jane also sees members of TTR's mentoring program excel in school—100 percent of the women involved for four years or more have graduated high school. Ninety-nine percent of those participants have gone on to attend four-year colleges.

Debra sees a more tangible impact—after a few weeks in the TTR program, the young women sit a little higher in their saddles.

"There's just something about sitting up on the back of a horse that gives them a boost of confidence."

ALL PHOTOS: TAKING THE REINS

