



A Closer Look At: Taking The Reins

This Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization builds girl power through horse power.

By ELIZABETH PUTFARK
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Nestled on one of the last green spaces in urban Los Angeles' 13th district, an 80-year-old red barn houses 15 horses, a flock of chickens, a handful of rabbits and a sheep who thinks she runs the place. But those 2.5 acres are also home to much more.

In the past 20 years, more than 3,400 at-risk teens and young girls have found a haven at the small farm thanks to Taking The Reins, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization founded by Judith Hopkins and Debra Avery in 1998.

“The program started by seeking out kids



Taking The Reins program manager Misty Odett (left)

helps children from a local homeless shelter enjoy a week of summer camp.

program moved from a rented facility to its current location along the Los Angeles River.

During each six-week session, after-school and weekend students surrender their phones and any other technology at the facility's gate. They spend half their time working the half-acre organic garden plot acquired in 2009, studying everything from soil analysis and seed-to-skillet gardening to the impact of the sun's trajectory on growing seasons.

The other half of their time they devote to the program's biggest draw: the horses. Students spend time caring for them, riding and learning about animal science. All horses are donated, mostly from Haven's former contacts in the Arabian Horse Association, wherein she showed and worked throughout her life. As a result, they tend to arrive with extensive showing backgrounds and plenty to teach the girls, some of whom earn the right to ride them in regional fun shows.

But getting to compete is only one small perk of sticking around.

"Of the kids who stay two years or more—about 40 percent of after-school and weekend riders—we have a 100 percent graduation rate from high school on time," Haven says. "Around 98 percent who apply to college get accepted, most on partial or full scholarship. And of those that apply, most go into the sciences. All but one so far have been the first in their families to go to college."

After their initial six-week stint, students can continue with the program when space allows, sometimes taking a short break so others can have the spot. If they stay long enough, they may become mentors in the program, instructing young girls in the same way they were brought along only a few years prior.

from high-risk neighborhoods and giving them a kind of after-school clubhouse where they could go and just have a place to be outside," says Jane Haven, executive director at Taking The Reins. "A lot of the kids who come to us, they've never played in the dirt, never touched an animal, much less a horse. Eighty-five percent live below the poverty line and go to Title 1 schools.

"To kids with that kind of background, we just have cool stuff," she continues.

Formerly on the program's board of directors, Haven took the helm at Taking The Reins in 2013, the same year the pro-

Everyone pays on a sliding scale according to ability, which means the vast majority of students rely on scholarships. Youth service grants make up 50 percent of the program's annual budget, while the rest comes from corporate and individual donors—the latter of which have proven the most difficult to attract.

"It's a hard case to sell to private donors because they feel like, 'You want me to donate money so girls can take horse riding lessons? Give me a break!'" Haven says with a laugh. "First you have to get the individual to believe in philanthropy enough to want to part with some of their money, then you've got to show them you're as worthy as all the other charities out there."

While riding may look like merely an expensive hobby, Haven explains to donors what horse people already know: that working with horses serves as a unique catalyst to the development of positive character traits like teamwork, responsibility, leadership and self-confidence, all of which girls begin learning their first days in the program.

"One of the first things we tell our kids is whoa means 'Whoa!' and no means 'No!' If you don't say either in a way that is empowered and clear enough for the horse or person to hear you, then you really need to work on that," Haven says. "Sending clear messages and setting clear boundaries is something you have to do with animals.

"You don't really have to explain to the girls how that carries over into their human relationships," Haven adds. "They see that pretty much on their own."

When Mary Barrientos started at Taking The Reins as an 11-year-old, she hardly had the courage to say "hello," let alone "whoa." As soon as she started the program, however, all of that began to change.

"I turned into a whole different person," says Barrientos. "I went from not being able to extend my hand and introduce myself to being someone very forward and outgoing. It



Participants in Taking The Reins' program split their time 50/50 between working in the organic garden and working with the horses.



was a night-and-day transition. My parents saw it; everybody at school saw it.”

Barrientos went on to become a mentor in the program, ride as a member of the show team, and travel as a Taking The Reins ambassador when the staff gave presentations to drum up financial support.

Each of those experiences, she explains, would have seemed unfathomable if you'd known her as a child.

“If it wasn't for the program and the people working there, I don't know who I would be today—maybe still that shy little girl,” says Barrientos. “Instead, I'm a leader. I'm a junior in college, studying business, and I'm holding three jobs right now. I can do all that because of the experience I have running around, working with horses, doing all these extra things.

“I'm hoping to start a small business after college, but my biggest goal with that is to find a way to give back,” Barrientos continues. “Because of Taking The Reins, that's what it's all about for me.”

Barrientos still volunteers at Taking The Reins as often as she can, tuning up horses and helping other riders. For Haven, that kind of full-circle impact exactly fulfills the

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mission of the program, which despite a focus on horses, science and the environment isn't really about those things at all.

“In a nutshell, we're a youth achievement and education program using the natural environment, farming and animal industry experiences to raise up inner city kids,” Haven says. “We present learning in a hands-on, engaged, physical way that allows us to address certain behaviors that are harder to help in a school setting. Then when they go back in the classroom, they just participate more. They raise their hands more; they speak up more; they listen more. They're more empowered.

“For every young woman, learning to take care of yourself and make good decisions is important,” Haven continues. “But it's especially important in the inner city. The stakes here are just higher.”

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>>> GET IN TOUCH: Email the organization at info@takingthereins.org or call the Taking The Reins office at (323) 906-1560.

>>> GET INVOLVED: Taking The Reins accepts donations on its website at takingthereins.org/donations-page. You can also tour the farm during visitation days or sign up to volunteer.