



Magic and Debbie Garcia-Bengochea talks with Equine VIP

by Susan Ashbrook, owner Equine VIP

This month's feature talks to Magic and Debbie Garcia-Bengochea (education director) at Gentle Carousel. Magic is a very special mini with a big heart. Magic was chosen as the Most Heroic Pet in America by AARP Magazine. We've heard of therapy dogs, but Magic is a specially trained therapy horses owned by Gentle Carousel! Let's learn more about this special horse and program.....

How did you find Magic and select other Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses?

We found Magic as a baby and immediately liked her calm, confident spirit and outgoing personality. It is very difficult to find a horse that will be part of the Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horse team. Our therapy horses are chosen for their beauty, very small size, exceptional temperament, intelligence and desire to spend time with people. They also must have bright blue eyes. Most start their training at a young age and have been given love and attention by people from the day they are born.

We have searched for and found horses from one side of the country to the other, from

California to Texas, Florida to New York.

We understand Magic is unusually small, is this necessary to become a Gentle Carousel therapy horse?

Gentle Carousel has some of the smallest miniature horses in the world. Most are only 23-27 inches tall. Rainbow and Peanut were only 14 inches tall at birth and Milky Way weighed only 9 pounds at birth. The horses are not dwarfs. They are normal and healthy in every way, just tiny.

There are many qualities we look for in a future therapy horse and size is one of them. It is much easier for a very small horse to move around in a school classroom or in a hospital room. While a larger, more powerful horse may seem very daunting to a young child, an elderly person or someone with a disability, an instant bond seems to form with our little blue eyed therapy horses.

What kind of skill and training was involved for Magic to be one of your most requested therapy horses?

Magic completed our regular training program but what makes her so special is something that cannot be trained. She seems to have a

natural ability to find the one person in a crowd who needs her the most. We often find out about the personal stories of people after Magic has met with them.

She was with one patient as he awoke from a coma and with another who peacefully passed away with his hand resting on her head. She was at a camp for children and really wanted to spend time with one little boy. We found out that he had just learned his cancer had returned. Magic and the little boy stayed together with their foreheads touching for the longest time. At a program for Alzheimer patients, Magic keep going back to the same woman. We found out that she had not been out of her room in months but was waiting in the lobby since early that morning when she heard horses were coming to visit.

Magic was a special friend for several years to a little girl who had a heart transplant and then got leukemia. She told the doctors that she would only get out of bed for Magic. One little boy with a brain tumor said it was like Magic could see inside his soul.

While a reporter was taking photos of a Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horse visit, a woman who had not spoken since she arrived at the assisted care facility three years earlier began talking to Magic. "Isn't she beautiful" were her first words. "It's a horse". The activities director began to cry and told the woman she loved her. "I love you too," the woman answered... her first full sentence to another person. The woman has continued to talk ever since that visit with Magic.

I bet you are often asked if Magic is housebroken?

We are asked that question quite a bit and the answer is yes. Magic is housebroken and so are the other therapy horses.

The question we are asked the most is "Do your horses live indoors with you?" because most people only see our horses inside buildings. No they do not. When they are off duty our horses run and play and are normal horses in every way. They have a great life.

What happens on a Gentle Carousel visit?

Each visit and every day is different. We adjust the time and activities to the individual needs of the participants. From a magical tea party for a child with a life ending illness to working as part of the treatment process inside a school for autistic children, the goal of Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses is to provide a one of a kind experience. This summer



in addition to our regular programs, our horses worked with police officers during community outreach programs in high crime areas, worked at a camp for foster children and a camp for children with cancer, helped with child abuse prevention programs and visited libraries and at-risk youth programs as part of Gentle Carousel's literacy program Reading Is Magic.

After a hospital or hospice visit we like to leave a stuffed toy horse that looks like the real one on each bed and if Gentle Carousel participants would like photographs taken with our horses, we make sure there is a photographer available.

Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses is an all volunteer nonprofit charity. The team of therapy horses visit over 4000 adults and children each year. Gentle Carousel's Reading Is Magic program also works with thousands of children each year.

What type of places has Magic visited? Do therapy horses encounter unusual obstacles?

Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses work inside hospitals, assisted care programs, programs for Alzheimer patients, group homes and with patients in hospice care. They also work with adults and children with disabilities and at risk and abused children. Our horses visit schools and libraries with Gentle Carousel's Reading Is Magic program (named after Magic).

Because our horses visit patients inside private homes as well as in public programs they all need to be able to walk up and down stairs, ride in elevators, walk on different floor surfaces, move around hospital equipment and feel confident around other animals. They must be calm in the most challenging situations and trust their handlers completely when something unexpected happens. Learning the skills needed to be a therapy horse takes about two years and there is always something new to learn.

In addition to our basic training, as Gentle Carousel's "Goodwill Ambassador" Magic has learned to work in busy television and radio studios, travel on airplanes, master the catwalk at a charity fashion show, work with elephants and zebras at a photo shoot and allow Benji the canine movie star to lead her into a building during the filming of a documentary. Magic just visited a radio station and to get to the studio she needed to walk down stairs, ride an elevator, walk across a curved wooden bridge with a loud waterfall next to it and walk on three different kinds of floor surfaces. She then needed to behave in the studio for a half hour interview.

Every therapy horse visit has some kind of challenge but the horses love all of the attention. Each individual therapy horse only works two

days a week for a maximum of two hours. We want to keep it fresh and fun for them.

What kind of special grooming does Magic and other Gentle Carousel horses receive? I understand there is a poem that is read before Magic enters a room? Can you tell us more?

A Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horse visit should be a magical experience. When the horses walk into a hospital room they have been clipped, bathed, brushed and have shiny polished feet. They also have "fairy dust" sparkles in their manes and tail. On special occasions they even wear costumes designed for each horse including tuxedos, cowboy outfits, clown suits, princess outfits and holiday costumes.

Just before the horses enter a room with a child, a poem called "Magic Horses" is read. It is about horses with blue eyes and fairy dust who make memories that last forever. Many parents asked for copies so now we send a copy to the parents with a photo of their child's therapy horse visit on it. One mother of a child who had spent his life in the hospital told us, "We never had a happy day... and now we will always have a happy day to remember."

If someone is interested, where can they learn more?

The Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses website is a great place to start. Photos speak louder than words so it is a good way to really see what our horses are doing. Visit: www.Horse-Therapy.org

Equine VIP is written by Producer/Host Susan Ashbrook who is also developing a TV series based on her interviews with celebrities and top equestrians. For more information go to www.equineVIP.com

Equine VIP interviews celebrities and equestrian VIPs because "If It's About Horses, We Cover It".



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