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✉ AGENN@LIBN.COM

☎ 631.913.4241

🐦 @ADINAGENN

'A Race We Will Win'

Pal-O-Mine Equestrian embarks on a \$3M capital campaign

By ADINA GENN

On a recent Thursday, Lisa Gatti led a group of 25 or so future ambassadors through Pal-O-Mine Equestrian, a 13-acre horse-therapy farm in Islandia.

The tour fell on the eve of the upcoming Pal-O-Mine's capital campaign – the non-profit's first and dubbed "A Race We Will Win." The organization hopes to raise \$3 million to renovate and restore facilities and implement other infrastructure improvements. The campaign's big splash seemingly coincides with Pal-O-Mine's annual "Day at the Races," on June 7 at Belmont Park, the day before the Belmont Stakes. Already the organization has raised \$500,000 towards its campaign.

At the tour, Gatti was at once welcoming to each of her guests, all the while embodying the responsibility that comes with overseeing 23 horses and other livestock, eight full-time and 30 part-time employees, 80 volunteers and 400 weekly students. The organization has capacity to handle 200 more.

Gatti guided visitors through the facility's 20-stall barn, which is integral to the nonprofit's therapeutic riding program for those with disabilities and other vulnerable populations.

The guests on the tour were there at the invite of Nancy Engelhardt, an equestrian who helped launch The Energia Partnership, who serves on Pal-O-Mine's board of directors.

To the novice, horses and therapy might seem a surprising combination. But horses are known to mirror what people in their presence are feeling, helping to build confidence and trust, and providing opportunities for developing language and social skills.

Even at the beginning of the tour, Gatti was answering questions.

What, for example, inspired her nearly 25 years ago to launch a nonprofit that serves such a wide network of people? At the farm now there are clients with any combination of cognitive, physical or emotional disabilities. There are veterans and adjudicated youth as well as those coping with grief, trauma and abuse, eating disorders, substance abuse, addiction or codependency. And there are military and first responder wellness programs, speech and occupational programs and even corporate workshops for team building and leadership skills.

Standing inside the barn, with a circle gathered around her, Gatti told her story.

"I loved riding and I loved to teach," Gatti said.

While in college, her father, who worked in publishing, used to send her books, encouraging her to spend free time reading. One package arrived with Danielle Steele's "Palomino," a story about equestrian therapy. "It changed my life," she said about the novel, noting that later, Steele wrote an



Photos by Judy Walker

Lisa Gatti is founder and CEO of Pal-O-Mine Equestrian, which houses 23 horses as well as livestock, and offers therapeutic programs.

\$8,000 check to Pal-O-Mine so that three students could attend a riding competition.

And when Gatti began working with at-risk youth, she found it rewarding.

By 1995, she opened Pal-O-Mine, a therapeutic horseback riding program at a barn on Long Island's North Shore. She wound up moving the program to six different barns before leasing the Islandia property from Computer Associates in 2004, purchasing it three years later, and buying additional property in 2018 to expand a vocational program for people with disabilities.

The setting at Pal-O-Mine provides a "calming environment" that helps the "healing processes" for students who have "a lot

of challenges," said Barbara Egloff of Eastern Suffolk BOCES, the divisional administrator for career, technical and adult education. Suffolk BOCES has worked with Pal-O-Mine since at least 2014.

Students can learn valuable lessons from the horses, Egloff said. For instance, if their body language signals being on-guard or they raise their arms in a way that could be perceived as a threat, the horse reads that. It's when students realize this over time and apply these lessons in the real world that they can benefit. Since their time at Pal-O-Mine, students have graduated high school or earned their equivalency, and entered BOCES tech programs and nursing assistant

programs, Egloff said.

Seeing these rewards, Gatti has never stopped loving her work.

"I don't need an alarm clock" to begin the day, she said.

She is at the office by 4:30 a.m. "to find some quiet time for emails" then returns home to get her daughter ready for school, before heading back to "officially start the day," which typically runs until 6 p.m.

Yes, there are evening events to attend, Gatti said. And "with livestock, there are never set hours because if animals are sick, then duty calls regardless of the time."

This is where Gatti's expertise comes in handy. She is able to handle some of the veterinarian work herself, though of course,



calls in a medical practice when needed.

This goes a long way towards supporting the organization's \$1.8 million budget, where 90 percent of every dollar spent goes to programming. The programs are structured to include certified equine specialists and licensed mental health specialists. And there are educators, job coaches and specialists, including speech pathologists and occupational therapists. The diverse staff fosters the diversity of the programs, Gatti said.

Patrice Frank, a philanthropic advisor who consults with the organization, said Gatti's "passion and vision to work through equestrian therapies with such a wide array of population" is "simply remarkable. I have learned in a short period of time how incredibly intuitive the animals are in working with all sorts of compromised situations."

Gatti strives to make programs that began with grants to become self-supporting.

For instance, in an on-site studio, participants gain vocational skills to foster independence and customize crafts, such as beaded mini horseshoe-ring key chains that are sold to other organizations. Gatti noted that it earned \$1,500 for 100 blue-beaded horse shoe rings for the April 29 Make A Wish Day, whose color is blue.

Post-tour, the new ambassadors were treated to lunch. And even if they were not able to support the organization financially, each seemed ready to help spread the word about this one-of-a-kind Long Island facility.

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