

Embrace Hope

Equine Therapy Program Helps Heal Sandy Hook Community

By Dani Moritz

Avielle Richman was a ray of sunshine. She was bright. She was happy. The curly-haired California girl, who had just moved from the West Coast two years prior, was, as Annette Sullivan explains, “one of those kids who just lifted your spirits.” She loved horses and looked forward to her Tuesday afternoon lessons with a pony named Betty. She adored summer camp and always had her birthday parties at the farm. In fact, she just had celebrated her sixth birthday at the barn surrounded by her friends in her first grade class and the horses who always brought out her biggest smiles.

But on December 14, 2012, everything changed. On that day, Avielle Richman walked through the doors of Sandy Hook Elementary for the last time and the world got a little darker.

Avielle was one of 26 people whose lives were taken by 20-year-old gunman Adam Lanza. She was one of six children connected to Annette Sullivan, who has owned and operated Zoar Ridge Stables in the Sandy Hook community for the past 20 years.

Annette has always loved working with children and, although she didn't yet know exactly how, she knew she needed to do something to help return the innocence and smiles to the children of Sandy Hook. The day after the tragic shooting, Annette and her husband Brian opened the doors of their stable to the community and invited families to come find some safety, some comfort, a tiny piece of normalcy.

Like everyone else in Newtown, Connecticut, she was grieving, but she knew her horses could provide at least a little hope.

“My friend lost her son. My students lost their brothers. I had five funerals to go to. I was grieving for Avielle. My own daughter had sat in that very classroom in first grade.”

Embrace Hope is an equine assisted therapy program that was born from the idea of horses helping heal the Sandy Hook community. The day after the tragedy, people began asking to bring their children to the barn so they could have but an hour of happiness. For Annette, she felt it was her responsibility to do something for the community, which was desperately in need.

“I wanted the children of Sandy Hook to feel like they are survivors, not victims,” she explained. “Knowing that the farm gave them a sense of safety, I wanted to find a way to make



“While in many people’s memories it fades a bit, for this community it’s still there and very raw. This community still needs help.”

- Dan Donovan, President of Embrace Hope



Embrace Hope's logo depicting the simple, but beautiful, joy of a child and a pony. Note the 26 stars rising to heaven representing the 20 children and 6 adults lost on December 14, 2012.

Logo created by Miggs Burroughs

them feel empowered. I think that's what any equestrian program can do, being in charge of animals and having a relationship with a horse gives children self-confidence and a sense of empowerment. For the children of Sandy Hook, I hope it will return to them a sense of security in their everyday lives.”

Brian Sullivan contacted his life-long friend Dan Donovan, who has many years of business experience to bring to the table to help them establish Embrace Hope. Dan now serves as the President of the program. Although not an equestrian himself, Dan has worked alongside Annette, Brian and many volunteers to create a lasting foundation to help victims of the Sandy Hook shooting and anyone in

need. Together, they also partnered with the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) to provide therapy to children and families free of charge.

Embrace Hope offers three types of therapeutic programs: EAGALA psychotherapy sessions, which pairs a licensed therapist with an equine specialist to address individual treatment goals; a farm club, which is essentially a modified 4-H program that teaches horsemanship for children affected by trauma; and what Annette refers to as the Young Trainers program in which participants work with rescue horses and discuss overcoming horses' trust issues, which often

Continued on page 66



*A child-size bench donated by SmartPak in Emilie's Garden
Photo Courtesy of Embrace Hope*

becomes a metaphor for their own struggles.

"There is a real and immediate need for the Sandy Hook Newtown Community," Dan said. "That hasn't gone away in the last year. It's still there. It's very real. However, once everyone feels that Sandy Hook is in good shape again we're not going to close the therapy program. We plan on keeping the stables open to offer equine assisted therapy to anyone who needs it – hopefully with an emphasis on children."

He explained that this fall, before school started, 20 families flocked to the barn in search of help because their children were afraid to go back to school. "While in many people's memories it fades a bit, for this community it's still there and very raw," Dan said, "This community still needs help."

Dan also noted that they are working hard to obtain their 501(c)(3) status to establish credibility and assure potential donors that their donations are going directly to Embrace Hope to help the community. As of now, the majority of the financial burden to provide these services free-of-charge rests on the Sullivan's shoulders.

But for everyone involved, according to Annette, that struggle is well worth it. "It's a tribute to Avielle and the other children that died on December 14 that we continue the service to their friends and to any child who has survived trauma. As long as there are children who can benefit from our program, we intend to keep it available."

She added, "Avielle's love of being at the farm was something that I wanted to give back to the kids who were her friends. Bringing joy back to her friends, who since December 14 often seem so lost, is what I believe our program can do. Although their eyes are guarded, the kids do have hope in their eyes too. It takes so little for the joy to come back, so it is our goal to embrace that. I want these kids to know they can come here whenever they need to find happiness, now or in years to come."

Annette Sullivan cannot erase the pain. She cannot bring back the lives lost or forget those children's faces. What she can do is embrace hope – and she does. In the spirit of little Avielle who rode with all her heart, and of the 26 angels who watch over Sandy Hook, Annette, Brian, Dan and everyone involved at Zoar Ridge Stables embrace hope and help heal the hearts of those in need.

For more information about Embrace Hope or to donate to their noble cause, visit <http://embracehopesandyhook.org>.



*Annette Sullivan
Photo Courtesy of Embrace Hope*



*Dan Donovan
Photo Courtesy of Embrace Hope*