

Little Prince visited The Parthenon!
Well, not really. This Parthenon is a full scale replica in Nashville, Tennessee. But, the Gentle Carousel horses really did visit Greece!
All photos courtesy of Gentle Carousel



Gentle Carousel Horses Head to

GRΣΣCΣ

By Dani Moritz

Nestled near Athens, Greece, in the city of Rafina is a walled paradise, which contains a beautiful garden, playground, café and children's library. The paradise is suitably named the Magic Garden after the miniature horse Magic, who is a Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horse all the way from the United States. The Magic Garden is a place where people can interact with Gentle Carousel's miniature horses and share in the hope these little horses inspire.

During the official park opening, former Prime Minister of Greece Kostas Karamanlis offered this dedication:

"For many years in the United States, Magic the therapy horse has comforted the sick, the elderly and those facing tremendous tragedy. Like the heroic horses of our history and mythology, Magic has proven herself worthy of honor and remembrance. It is with her own heroic accomplishments in mind that we dedicate this special place for the children of Greece in her name, to be known from this time on as the Magic Garden."

And this is just one piece of the magic that Florida-based therapeutic services Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses have brought to the Greek Community.

The Perfect Opportunity

Bringing Gentle Carousel — an all-volunteer, non-profit organization — to Greece would not have been possible without the immense support from the Greek community and the private sector, which has sponsored the entire journey for Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses.

Combine that funding with Greece's rich history in equine culture and Gentle Carousel's desire to work in orphanages, and it becomes clear why heading to Greece was an offer founders Jorge and Debbie Garcia-Bengochea simply couldn't refuse.

The unexpected outcry of support from the Greek community helped too. Debbie laughed as she recalled the welcome the horses received at the airport. "When they arrived at the airport, there was such a crowd that they had put up barricades. The horses are such superstars in Greece and everyone knows their names. They've now been on all of Greece's national media.

"The people of Greece feel it's an honor that the U.S. sent these horses to them to work with their children," she added. "The people have been super grateful."

The willingness of the volunteers and trainers at the facility in Greece have also made the transition a smooth one — ensuring everything from their food to their training meets Gentle Carousel's standards. Debbie says the staff is so dedicated that the head trainer actually left a show so he could meet the horses upon their arrival in Greece.



Everybody loves miniature horses - even nuns!



Two time National Champion in show jumping and volunteer George Frangogiannis with therapy horse Ivi.



Odysseas visited with Pavlo and made his dreams come true!

Visiting Orphanages

One of the primary reasons Debbie and Jorge wanted to head to Greece was to work in orphanages because in Greece adoption is rare and children remain in orphanages their entire childhoods, often isolated from society.

Now, with the help of Gentle Carousel, these children will have access to the miniature horses – who will play a major role in their lives. The city of Rafina has supplied a bus that takes orphans to the gardens so they can enjoy the playground, library, café and, most importantly, the horses.

To be able to take a horse to someone who would otherwise never be able to see one or touch one – it's pretty miraculous to see the look on a kid's face," Debbie said.

"Being there and seeing the orphans come pouring out and gathering at the vans and trying to peek in the windows [when we bring the horses to them] is like watching a miracle."

And according to Debbie, children aren't the only ones enjoying the horses. "The orphanage is run by Greek Orthodox nuns, who have devoted their entire lives to taking care of orphans," she said. "Well, who were the ones most enthralled? It was the nuns! They were all elderly women excited like little girls. They were hugging them and so excited to see them."

Granting Wishes

Gentle Carousel has impacted other groups too. The program has extended its services to children's hospitals and other Greek programs such as Porta Anikti (Door Open), an institute for adults and children with brain injuries, and HARA (Joy), an organization devoted to helping children with special needs.

"There was a little boy who was severely autistic and his parents drove a long distance to attend. When he was with the horses, it was the first time his parents had ever seen him be still – just sitting there and leaning his head on the horses. It's like little miracles for people," Debbie said.

Another miracle transpired when Gentle Carousel Greece teamed up with the Make-A-Wish Foundation. The foundation contacted them to inquire about granting the wish of a little boy named Pavlo. Pavlo had never met a real horse and wanted to meet one for Christmas. Because he spent most of his days in the hospital, this would be a rare opportunity for at least one of his wishes to come true.

"The Magic Garden was opened just for Pavlo and his family," Debbie said. "He thought he was leaving the hospital with his parents to have a hot drink. There were hugs and tears when therapy horse Odysseas walked into the cafe as Pavlo was drinking his hot chocolate. Odysseas visited with Pavlo while he finished his drink and then the two new friends were able to walk together in the Magic Garden. When it was time to put Odysseas back in his stall, Pavlo was told that the horse was one of Santa's special helpers. That is why there were piles of Christmas presents waiting for Pavlo in Odysseas' stall."

This is just one example of how miniature horses are changing people's lives all over the world – thanks to the hard work of organizations such as Gentle Carousel.

Sidelines commends the efforts of Debbie, Jorge and all of the people who dedicate their time to spreading the joy that these little horses can bring and inspiring the hope that encourages people to keep on keeping on. Thank you for making a difference.