

How horses are helping Haiti's children



Vivian (left) gets emotional as well as physical benefits from riding, while Pascacio (right) finds helping others very rewarding



Pascacio has been helping disabled children at his Athletic Club Centre Equestre for over six years



Pascacio was previously a professional showjumper

After a 7.3-magnitude earthquake hit the Caribbean nation of Haiti, few would immediately look to horse riding as a tool for healing. But with an estimated 4,000 amputees, and others left disabled by the earthquake, an equestrian occupational therapy programme in Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince is helping orphans with special needs improve their physical and emotional well-being.

Vivian, 24, is one of nine young people who are part of this weekly programme. Born with cerebral palsy and limited hearing, she has difficulty walking independently. While walking through the stable, she leans on friends and walls to support herself, but mounted on top of her black horse, Rex, she sits upright. Riding has improved her communication skills as well as her movement, as she not only gestures to the horse but mumbles words to get him to walk around the ring.

Founder of this programme Pascacio Antonio Sosa, known as 'Pacito' by his students, watches Vivian's progress as he motions to her to maintain her posture. The 35-year-old once professional rider says he views even the slightest improvement as a major accomplishment because he can relate to her struggle and those of other handicapped children.

Horses – the ultimate cure

Pascacio was paralysed from the waist down after falling out of a tree as a boy. Growing up in a family of horse handlers, he was surrounded by horses as a child and learned how to ride at the age of five. But he says it was the horses which helped him regain his strength after his accident, and eventually he was able to teach himself to walk again.

"I believe horses can cure anything," he says. "I show them [the children] that it's possible to communicate with horses. This

helps them a lot and it's incredible to see the children's improvement."

A native of the Dominican Republic, Pascacio moved to Haiti as a teenager. He says although he might not have been born in Haiti, he learned how to speak fluent Creole from locals and fell in love with the country.

"The heart of Haiti is sweet – it's what sold the country to me. I love the fact that it's an underdeveloped country, which means I have the chance to grow with it," says Pascacio.

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Eventually, this love led him to settle in Haiti and become a professional rider. His career took him to the heights of winning first place in the World Jumping Challenge competition in 2003.

Pascacio felt he had to give something back by providing disabled children a chance at a better life. "Disabled children have a lot of problems here. They don't have families. They don't have financial means. They have to fight to laugh every day. It motivates me – what I've done is not enough and I still have more to do."

With no funding behind him, in 2004 Pascacio contacted an orphanage for

disabled children called Wings of Hope. The home gladly accepted his invitation to give the children weekly horse riding lessons. Operating out of his stableyard, Athletic Club Centre Equestre, friendships developed over six years as Pascacio saw the children blossom.

Disaster strikes Haiti

When the earthquake hit on 12 January 2010, Pascacio thought the worst. "On the day of the earthquake, I thought I had lost them all," he says.

Thankfully, after contacting the orphanage, he found out that none of the children was hurt. However, the orphanage's building was severely damaged and had cracked and collapsed walls. With an unsound structure, the children had to evacuate. They lived in a space the size of a two-car garage for days after the earthquake.

Wings of Hope education coordinator K C Bersch says the children had to bathe, eat, and fulfil all their needs in that one space. "You could tell by their behaviour that they were affected," says 30-year-old Bersch. "I realised they completely understood what had happened and some of the children cried out: 'the rocks are falling, the rocks are falling.'"

The earthquake took an estimated 250,000 lives and left 1.5 million Haitian people homeless. But while dealing with the trauma, the children were able to



“On the day of the earthquake, I thought I had lost them all”

find a bit of stability when they returned to the stables. Bersch says when the children heard riding lessons were restarting, they started kicking out with the sides of their legs as if they were telling an invisible horse to giddy up.

Bersch adds that since horse riding was not affected by the quake, it was an emotional comfort to the children to be able to pet the horses. “The horses are unconditional. Once the children get on a horse, they feel accepted, loved and affirmed by that horse. And to have that again was a joy,” says Bersch.

Riding as therapy

The day *Horse* visits the centre, joy permeates throughout Pascacio’s hour-long session with his students. The giggles of the children echo around the stables as they feed carrots to the horses and feel the tickle of the horses’ tongues on their palms. But the real work is done in the riding arena, as some of the wheelchair bound children are able to sit upright in the saddle with assistance.

“The walk of a human being is similar to the walk of a horse. The horse is straight and steady and allows the children to feel the sensation properly,” says Pascacio.

Equine therapy has been recognised for its health benefits. A research team from Washington University, USA found that hippotherapy – the use of the rhythmic movement of a horse to effect therapeutic gains – improved trunk and head stability and upper extremity reaching in children with spastic diplegic cerebral palsy. Significant improvements often continued, even months after the therapy finished.

Although Pascacio is not an occupational therapist by trade, he hopes someday to

Despite the devastating earthquake in Haiti, the children have found stability and enjoyment in horses. Pascacio hopes to help more children, particularly those affected by the quake



become certified. But despite the lack of professional training, Bersch says she sees the improvement in the children, especially Vivian who has cerebral palsy.

“Since she started riding, Vivian has gained a lot of muscle strength within her torso and her legs. Although she’s still weak in some areas she’s now able to walk further independently,” says Bersch.

The improvements can also be seen outside the arena. Pascacio gives the children with Down’s Syndrome a sense of responsibility and pride by allowing them to help with saddling the horses and brushing them with careful, gentle strokes.

Overcoming the stigma

But it’s not all work at the stables, as free time allows Pascacio an opportunity to

interact with the children. One of the children in a wheelchair is nicknamed ‘Vagabond’ – whenever the eight-year-old is asked how many girlfriends he has, he cheekily holds up three fingers.

As Pascacio lifts him out of his chair, he lets out a playful scream. Pascacio then plops him down on a soft pile of hay, encouraging the other children to join in the fun. The group throws bunches of hay around, enjoying the rush of energy.

Pascacio’s mission is to de-stigmatise disabilities in Haiti, where many children who are born with disabilities are either abandoned or neglected. Estimates for the exact number of children

left handicapped by the earthquake in January are sketchy at best, but it seems their numbers are certainly on the rise. Bersch says that post-quake, Wings of Hope orphanage had to turn away many young children.

She adds that the old, structurally damaged orphanage has been demolished, and there are now plans to build a new home that she hopes will be well-equipped to support this new generation of children who suffered in the aftermath of the devastating quake.

Pascacio hopes to expand his riding programme further to include children with amputations and other disabilities caused by the earthquake. He would also like to provide them with suitable transport. Currently, the nine children and two adults who accompany them take to the bumpy roads around Port-au-Prince on a pick-up truck with aluminium sidings known as a ‘tap-tap’.

More importantly, Pascacio hopes that through this programme he can reciprocate the happiness that helping the children has given to him. “Above all it’s joy that I want to give them,” he says. “And secondly, I want to help them as much as possible with their physical condition. And down the road, one of them could become a Paralympic champion. Why not? That’s my dream.” 🐾