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Middle schoolers in the saddle at Roger Williams Park

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Victoria Gonzalez, a student at Samuel Bridgham Middle School, prepares to ride Red, her favorite horse. She's participating in a program that's part of the Providence After School Alliance and taught by Dina DeAngelis, a Bridgham occupational therapist and experienced rider.

The Providence Journal / Connie Grosch

PROVIDENCE

Red, a chestnut quarter horse, is acting a little skittish this afternoon. Maybe it's the presence of the four massive police horses lined up in formation in the center of the ring.

Maybe it's the presence of so many visitors, including the extended family of [Alex Gonzalez](#), who snap pictures as Alex guides Red around the indoor ring at Roger Williams Park, where the city police department's horses are stabled.

"Quiet hands," Dina DeAngelis tells 13-year-old Victoria Gonzalez. "Eyes in front. Don't let him stop."

A small miracle has been taking place twice a week in a little-known corner of the park.

Ten middle school students from neighborhoods where there are precious few parks, much less farmland, are learning how to groom, saddle and ride horses, thanks to a partnership between the schools, the police department, [Mayor David N. Cicilline](#) and the Providence After School Alliance, a nationally recognized afterschool program for middle schoolers.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, these children from Samuel Bridgham Middle School on Westminster Street tumble out of a bus and spend two hours in a world far different from the one at school.

Because the police horses are too big for beginners, DeAngelis brings Red, her own horse. A second quarter horse, Dallas, is on loan from a therapeutic riding stable.

As students stroll into the barn, the sweet smells of straw and hay mix with the earthy scent of horse. The students tug on their boots, borrowed, like everything else, from DeAngelis, who happens to be both an occupational therapist at Bridgham and an experienced rider. Then they tie up Red and Dallas and brush the dust out of the horses' coats, clean their hooves and put on the tack. Bridling a 1,000-pound animal isn't as easy as it looks. Two girls try to pry Dallas' mouth open, but he keeps twisting his head away from them.

"Give him a kiss first," says DeAngelis. "Then stick your thumbs under his back gums."

The girls giggle. They persevere. Finally, Dallas opens his mouth and the bit slides in.

There is a lot of banter about which horse each child likes best. Dallas seems to be the favorite because he is more docile, a horse that breaks into a trot at the slightest pressure from a rider's knees. Red, especially on Tuesday, is fractious, tossing his head and threatening to nip. Alex Villegas, 12, said he prefers Red because he is more of a challenge.

The boys refuse to admit that they were the least bit scared when they arrived here six weeks ago. A couple of them had ridden before in the Dominican Republic, where they were born. The girls are more open.

"I thought I was going to fall," one girl says.

"I almost did," says another.

Everyone agrees on one thing, though. Mucking around with horses brightens even the dullest day. How can anyone stay cranky after a horse has just nuzzled your neck or slobbered on your sweater? Watch the concentration, the calmness that descends, when these students begin grooming Dallas and Red. The students take turns riding during the two-hour lessons.

“The best part is the riding,” Alex says.

“I can canter and trot,” says Raymond Fernandez, also 12. “Not a lot of kids can say that.”

The program is the brainchild of DeAngelis, who was inspired by a similar program in Philadelphia, where children clean stalls in exchange for riding lessons. After she contacted PASA last year about offering riding lessons to students, Hillary Salmons, executive director of Kids Count Rhode Island, thought, “OK, but where would we find the horses and the stable?”

A few weeks later, it dawned on Salmons that the Police Department had stables at the park. When she contacted Police Chief Dean Esserman, he said, “Why not?”

In the six weeks since the lessons began, DeAngelis says their progress has been nothing short of remarkable. The students are much more confident, much more aware of their environment. They are taught to ride a hunt seat, which requires considerable eye-hand coordination. It requires that a rider think before he or she acts. It calls for sensitivity to detail, whether it’s tightening the cinch or keeping a firm but steady pressure on the reins.

“This program has been a springboard,” DeAngelis says. “The world has opened up to them.”

DeAngelis took one of her students to a horse show in Coventry. The student looked at the horses, the riders in their fitted jackets and jodhpurs, and said, “Is this where the all the rich people live?”

Now in its fifth year, the Providence After School Alliance has created a web of afterschool activities for approximately 2,000 middle school students, with classes offered at neighborhood hubs, including libraries, Boys & Girls Clubs and organizations such as Save The Bay.

“Talk about hands-on learning,” Salmons said Tuesday. “These kids are learning responsibility. They are getting to know the police officers. It’s an incredible team-building exercise.”

Chief Esserman was just as enthusiastic: “Any American police chief will tell you that the best way to fight crime is to invest in children. We do that every day. This is just another example.”

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