

# LION

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MAGAZINE

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DECEMBER 2019 LIONMAGAZINE.ORG

## The Power of Kindness

Lions give strength to  
those with special needs



Lions Clubs International

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# Horse Power

*For Lion Diane Besson, saving an old horse was just the beginning*

By Erin Kasdin • Photos by Lauren Justice



Diane Besson with Victor, the Welsh pony she rescued.





Hailey, 12, walks better after she rides, making the lessons not only fun, but great physical therapy.

**I**t was 2018 and Diane Besson was off to Muskego, Wisconsin, to pick up her eggs from the local CSA (community-sponsored agriculture) she'd joined. As she pulled up to the farm, she noticed a couple of tiny horses in a nearby pen. The only shelter was a small fabric Quonset. One of the horses looked incredibly malnourished. "I couldn't believe he had survived our last winter living in that hut," she wrote in an article for *WisconsinLion*. She found out the horse's name was Victor, and when she asked the farmer what was wrong with him, he told her, "That's what an old horse looks like."

She wasn't convinced.

She began to research horse care after watching his decline over several weeks. "It was apparent to me, but not his owners, that he was malnourished and would not survive another Wisconsin winter," she says. Other people must have been commenting too, because the owners had put a sign in front of his pen, saying, "This is what an old horse looks like."

Besson decided she would save him.

## The Rescue

Besson had never owned a horse before, so she went to her friend, Lion Robin Salerno, for help. She let Besson groom her horses so she could begin to understand horse care. Besson also needed to find a place to keep Victor. Salerno suggested they drive down the road to Jericho Creek Farm to meet Wendy Konichek. Besson instantly felt at home at Jericho Creek. "It had a calm, quiet energy to it, and I instantly liked Wendy," she says.

Besson showed Konichek the photo of Victor.

"You get him here and I'll make room for him," said Konichek.

Besson hadn't exactly made friends with Victor's current owner, so she sought help from her husband, Lion Dan Besson. "I needed his political expertise and negotiation skills to convince the farmer to give us Victor," she says.

Dan went to talk to the farmer. He brought brochures for Jericho Creek Farm, and Besson credits that with convincing the farmer to let them take the horse. "I truly believe that seeing the brochures and the wonderful place Victor would be going helped convince the farmer and his wife to give me Victor. Granted, they weren't happy, but I think they knew I was an answer to their problem. They either couldn't afford to take care of Victor or were too ignorant of his needs. I think both."

## Long in the Tooth

On July 25, 2018, Victor arrived at Jericho Creek Farm. All 30 horses whinnied a greeting to the tiny horse when the trailer pulled in.

Diane began coming to the farm three to four days a week to help with barn chores and see Victor, who she learned was actually a Welsh pony. It turns out, he had a dental condition that is common in older horses. The term "long in the tooth" comes from the propensity of older horses to grow long, irregularly shaped teeth. Those teeth then make it impossible to chew properly, and the horse can't digest enough nutrients. So, they become malnourished.

Victor was severely malnourished before Diane Besson stepped in.



Once his long tooth was addressed, Victor was able to start putting weight back on. And Besson, spending more and more time at the farm, began to see exactly what it was Konichek was up to at Jericho Creek.

## Horse Power Healing

Wendy Konichek was already a well-known name in show-horse circles when she saw a demonstration by SMILES, a nonprofit offering equine therapy to those with special needs. “That planted the seed,” says Konichek. She had been looking for a way to give back to the community and it was a nice way to give purpose to the older horses on the farm.



Volunteers like Besson do the majority of the chores at Horse Power Healing Center, including feeding horses and mucking stalls.

Already working in the home healthcare field, Konichek was one of just 25 people to win a spot in the PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship) International certified riding instructor program. She went on to get a mental health certificate and one for working specifically with veterans, all through PATH.

She now offers several programs geared toward helping people through the power of horses: the Equine-Assisted Therapeutic program for children and adults with special needs; Horses for Hope, which is for people diagnosed with terminal illnesses; Horses for Heroes, which introduces veterans to horseback riding; and Healing for Horses, which rescues horses who are maltreated or neglected, all through the nonprofit Horse Power Healing Center (HPHC).

## The Great Equalizer

“She really opens up when she’s on the horse,” says Judy, whose daughter, Emma, comes once a week to ride. “I can tell that it’s making her feel more confident.”

Emma, 23, has a condition called delayed myelination, which affects her complex and critical thinking. She has a warm, easy-going personality and a great sense of humor. Today she’s wearing a tie-dyed tee-shirt with an image of a cat attacking a pirate ship. When she’s not riding or working at a local auto parts warehouse, Emma loves dressing up and creates elaborate costumes, all on her own.

She’s only been riding since July, but, Emma says,

*“Riding makes me feel good about myself.”*

Brittany, mom to Haley, 12, who also comes once a week to ride, agrees. “She gets a lot of physical benefits that Wendy could tell you about, but honestly, the social aspect of it is even better. She goes to school and she tells all of her friends about riding horses, and it helps her interact with her peers,” she tells the morning talk show *The Morning Blend*, after the center had been nominated as a top nonprofit in the area.

Hailey was born with schizencephaly, a birth defect in which clefts form in the brain. The condition causes her to have high muscle tone and low muscle mass – a painful combination. Walking is difficult and she often uses an assistive device. But the motion of the horse helps her walk better.

“On Saturdays, she wakes up with a big smile and says, ‘Horseback riding!’” says Brittany.

Allie Chase is the local librarian and an Army veteran who participates in the Horses for Heroes program. She’s also a Lion. And she has a lot of good things to say about Konichek and the HPHC programs. “Wendy has been a Lion long before she became a Lion,” she says. “I’ve seen a lot of things she’s gone out of her way to do.” Like making sure all of her students have show clothes if they’re participating in an event, or buying boots for one man who needed them but couldn’t afford them.

Chase has gained a lot of confidence by learning to ride. “It’s the great equalizer,” she says. “It’s very freeing to be on top of a horse.”

## There's One Drawback, Though

Lessons are seasonal and weather dependent. There's no indoor riding arena. So, between mid-October and mid-March, students go about their non-horseback riding lives. For most, the difference is noticeable.

"It's so blatant," says Brittany. While she does swim in the winter to keep physically active, Hailey's walking is "so much better" over the summer when's she's riding, and regresses over the long winter months, she says.

That's where Lions are hoping to step in.

Besson, who had been a Lion for just a year when she found HPHC, and husband, Dan, who is a long-time Lion and Zone Chair, saw an opportunity to create a specialty branch club that could focus on supporting the needs of HPHC, including raising the funds for the new indoor facility.

Besson approached Konichek with the idea. "The only thing I knew about Lions was that they had the corn stand," says Konichek. But she soon learned they were a lot more than corn. "What impressed me most was that all the money donated went right back into the community."



*"The Lions name holds credibility."*

## They've Got the Horse, They Need the Cart

The Kettle Moraine Equine Lions Club is now in its second year and is focused on several goals. "We have the horse, now we need the cart," says Besson, who is still a Hales Corner Lion, but acts as the liaison between the two clubs. While a big focus of their fundraising efforts is for an indoor area (with a later goal of building an entire indoor complex, complete with housing facilities for overnights or weekend camps), there are some smaller items on their plate as well.

"We have the horse, now we need the cart," says Besson. One benefactor donated a Norwegian Fjord horse for pulling a cart. But the club still needs US\$7,700 of its US\$8,700 goal to purchase a wheelchair-accessible harness and cart.

"We're still learning," says Besson, of fundraising. But she's confident that accomplishing their goals as Lions will be far easier than trying to do it alone. "The Lions name holds credibility," she says.

Wendy Konichek became a Lion when she realized they have the same mission as she does -- to give back to the community.





Hailey and her mom, Brittany, play with their new puppy, Finn, who typically joins them on lesson day at the stable.

## “I See the Possibilities”

In Horse Power Healing Center, Besson sees a place that epitomizes what it means to be a Lion. “There was a need, and Wendy stepped forward to serve and to help. That included horse care and rehabilitation, but it also included the needs of our fellow men and women — those veterans who served this country and those men, women, and children born with special needs.”

Victor passed away in April, but Besson feels good knowing he lived a good life in the end. She strokes the nose of a white horse she helped Konichek rescue. Konichek calls him “Diane’s horse.” Her manner around all the horses is calm and confident. It’s hard to imagine she knew nothing about them just a year and a half ago. But she is clearly at home here now.

After being reluctant to join Lions too soon after retiring at first, she now seems right at home in the yellow vest. It was the Welsh pony named Victor, who had been written off as too old for a good life, that brought her here. And now, it’s the students and their families at HPHC, who refuse to be written off, who keep her coming back.

“I watch as a mom or dad are able to let down their guard while their child is in Wendy’s care. I see the joy in the faces of all the riders while enjoying their independence and freedom, sitting atop their horse. I look and I see the possibilities.”

“This is when I truly became a Lion,” she says. 🐾



Discover how Lions with shared interests are serving at [lionsclubs.org/specialtyclubs](https://lionsclubs.org/specialtyclubs).