

Equestrian Center Opens

By LYNN DAVIS

Years in the planning and construction, Peace Point Equestrian Center in Brooke County not only has begun training its first group of collegiate equestrian students but is inviting the public to take advantage of the facilities and activities offered.

Executive Director Ellen Fischer, an expert horse judge and instructor from Claysville, Pa., said the first group of Bethany College equestrian students arrived this semester, some bringing their own horses to be stabled at the hilltop facility just east of Bethany town limits. Horse riding classes are available to students in any major, she said. "The kids are really excited," she said, explaining that an equestrian club has been formed by 22 young people who will be participating in intercollegiate competition, the first event taking place on Oct. 10, sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh. The group plans to compete throughout the region.

"The club is completely self-supporting," she added, with contributions and money raised by the students themselves to cover the cost of travel and riding outfits.

Abby Radcliffe, a Bethany junior from Wheeling, said she has been riding since the age of 4 and was excited about the new programs offered at the college and the chance to have her horse at school with her. "This is what I've always wanted to do and never had the opportunity," she said. She added that she's enjoyed meeting other people with similar interests through the equestrian club.

Fischer, a Bethany College alumna, noted that PPEC is open to the public, as well, and will enhance the area's tourism offerings. She said groups could spend the weekend enjoying trail rides (there are some 3,000 acres available for trail riding), and stay at the college's 40-room hotel, Mountainside Conference Center. With the opening of Cabela's store in Ohio County, she added, persons interested in outdoors activities might want to bring their horses with them when they visit. Boarding is offered, and horses are available at PPEC for those who do not own their own.

Eventually, there will be six state-of-the-art Coverall barns, each with at least 25 imported English stalls, in addition to several indoor and outdoor rings.

Head instructor Barb Armbrecht of St. Clairsville, who has over 35 years of experience in English and Western riding, added that PPEC and Bethany can be a destination for persons interested in retreats and educational outings, whether for adults or young people. "The sky's the limit," she said.

Armbrecht explained that equestrian education makes sense. "It's a huge growth industry, with many employment opportunities for horse professionals," especially those with college degrees in the field.

"It also branches into the medical world, with new and exciting modalities in therapy. The horse industry is a several billion dollar industry."

Equestrian studies offerings are a way to market Bethany College, Armbrecht said. "The more a school offers, the greater chance of increasing enrollment."

PPEC founder and benefactor, Gene C. Valentine, said 49 Bethany students are involved in equestrian-related classes, and "There's no reason to believe we can't have 100 next year."

He added that he hopes to establish a veterinary studies center at the site, as there currently is no veterinary medicine school in West Virginia. Horse owners seeking specialized emergency treatment sometimes are forced to transport their animals to the Ohio State University facility, too long a trip for the horses to survive.

"There are 49,000 horses in West Virginia," he said, "and the money (for such care) is going to Pennsylvania and Ohio."

His goal is to keep that money and jobs in the Northern Panhandle area while attracting tourism dollars. "It's a community thing," he said. He said he also hopes to involve other area colleges and universities in the equestrian studies program.

Educational programs, private and group lessons, driving lessons and trail riding opportunities are just the beginning, Fischer noted. "We're still looking at resurrecting a fox hunt in the spring, adding an outside ring for Western shows and having 'City Slicker' weekends for 'wannabe cowboys,'" she said.

A campground, Olympic swimming pool and five-star restaurant also are planned for the site.

Valentine said a local chapter of the United States Pony Club is being formed in conjunction with PPEC. The Pony Club is the leading international junior equestrian organization in the world, he said, and Fischer is one of the few horse experts in the country named a "legend" by that group. It is not necessary for children (ages 8-21) participating in the club to own a horse or pony, but they must have access to one. Because PPEC and its related non-profit foundation have purchased and been given horses, that requirement will be met. The club offers programs in horse care, dressage, eventing, show jumping and other activities.

Riding and taking care of horses teaches young people responsibility and accountability, Fischer said. "It's a life-long skill, something they can enjoy all their lives."

Article appeared in The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register on September 26, 2004