

Bring on the Dancing Horses



Anna discovered her love of horses when, at the age of nine, she rode a friend's pony that promptly bolted with her aboard. As she both managed to stay on and also enjoyed the experience, her parents thought that this was probably a pastime to be nurtured.

So began a lifelong passion that has proven to be more than simply a hobby but has evolved into a reason to get out of bed when life became increasingly challenging.

On her fifteenth birthday, Anna was suddenly stricken with an unknown illness that left her bedbound for ten weeks and with severe memory loss.

Once she was able to move, her parents helped Anna out of bed and took her on a weekly trip to the local stables where she was able to ride her favourite pony. Although she could only walk along a bridleway, where once she was cantering and jumping, Anna states that 'this was the only thing that kept me going'.

Prior to this traumatic health event, Anna had been incredibly fit. She would work at the stables each weekend, carrying out physical activities as well as riding, and it was this initial high level of fitness that proved to be crucial. Anna's illness resulted in brain damage with a loss of 80% of her functionality and she was sleeping for fifteen hours a day. Although her undiagnosed condition had a massive cognitive impact, her fitness levels meant Anna was still able to be mobile. Once again, it was having horses in her life that inadvertently provided Anna with a means of carrying on.

Over the years, she doggedly pursued a career with horses, constantly hiding her fatigue from her colleagues. She worked with top class dressage horses, developing both her own and the horses' skill levels. It wasn't until Anna was 21 that she was finally diagnosed with suffering from myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME). This debilitating illness means that Anna suffers from chronic fatigue and finds it hard to focus for long periods. Despite these immense challenges, she is determined to continue following her passion of horse riding at as high a level as she can manage.

Anna's illness has recently reduced her strength considerably and she was frightened that she may never be able to ride again. With this in mind she contacted the Woodbridge group of Riding for the Disabled, knowing that a regular stable could probably not provide horses with a suitable temperament and the additional support that she needs. Anna was unsure that the RDA would accept her as a client as she is such an experienced rider and was

delighted when she was invited to attend the centre. Here she has teamed up with Lulu, a young horse with whom she is fast developing a strong bond and building a partnership. Anna's expertise is helping to train Lulu and they are working towards competing in on-line dressage competitions where the horse and rider are filmed and assessed without the need for travelling long distances.

Horses need to be supported by the rider's legs when turning and circling and balance is key to enabling a horse to move freely and harmoniously. To this end, a purposely designed and correctly fitted dressage saddle is key. Watch any international dressage rider and you will see they use a dressage saddle. Even the very best riders in the world need the correct equipment to help them to achieve their goals; along with determination, hard work and a great deal of sweat! Anna is an example of an RDA rider who is willing to put in the hard work and who would hugely benefit from the use of this specialist and supportive piece of equipment that lessens fatigue and enables the horse to carry a rider more easily. Her ultimate goal is to compete at the RDA national championships in Hartpury, Gloucestershire.

RDA (Woodbridge & District Group) aims to give accomplished riders the opportunity to excel, despite their disabilities and the challenges they face in their daily lives. They understand that riding provides more than physical therapy but also supports mental well-being; allowing clients to achieve success and enrich their lives. Anna puts it best when she says that during the dark times, 'It's the love of horses that has kept me going.' RDA Woodbridge would dearly love to support Anna in her future endeavours, allowing her, and others, to compete at as high a level as they can manage.