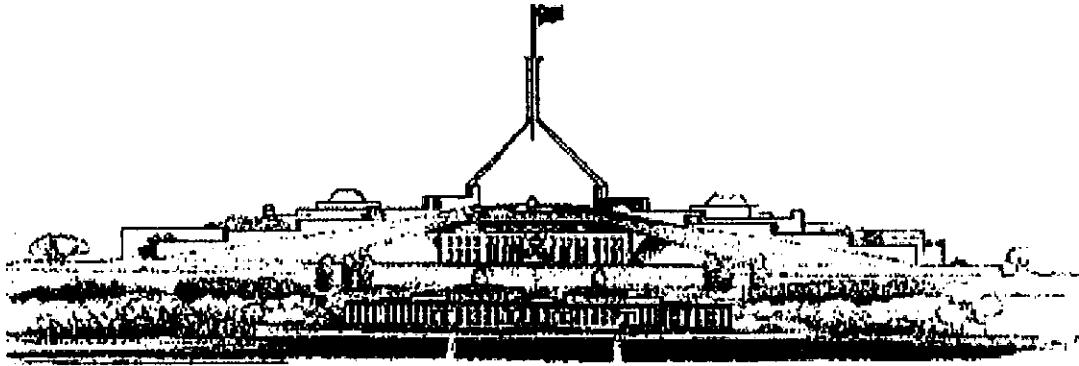




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

**Riding for the Disabled
Association South Australia**

SPEECH

Thursday, 13 August 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Questioner
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Senator BERNARDI (South Australia) (6.07 pm)— I ask those listening tonight to imagine that you are dropping your eight-year-old child off to horse-riding practice one afternoon. As you park the car, your child sees their pony in the yard and yells out its name, and that is the first time you have ever heard your child's voice. This is what happened for one mother as she took her son to a Riding for the Disabled centre in South Australia. That is what happened and that is what is possible with the RDA. I rise tonight to speak about this wonderful organisation. Tonight, I will speak primarily about the RDA's activities in my home state of South Australia, but I would like to point out that RDA is present in every state and territory.

What is RDA? RDA is a voluntary, not-for-profit organisation that provides horse riding instruction, carriage driving and other horse-related activities for people with disabilities. The first Australian RDA centre was established in 1964 and the South Australian branch began in 1972. Currently in South Australia the RDA uses 92 horses to deliver programs to 340 registered riders at 13 centres across the state in metropolitan and country locations. The RDA provides children and adults with disabilities with opportunities to ride horses for recreational and therapeutic benefit. Its activities include structured riding classes, recreational riding, therapeutic riding, vaulting, dressage, carriage riding and equestrian camps.

The organisation offers people with a disability a chance to be involved in physical activity that otherwise they might not be able to do. For many, it is their only opportunity to take part in a recreational sport in a safe environment. Riding or just being around horses can bring beneficial results for people with disabilities. The movement of a horse strengthens the rider's muscles, often leading to increased mobility for the rider. Horses are also used as therapeutic tools to help the rider improve their balance, coordination, posture control and spatial orientation. Interaction with the horse and volunteers also helps them develop communication skills, builds self-esteem and confidence and allows a person with a disability to be independent.

Riders are also encouraged to take part in riding and dressage competitions, where their skills are developed further. It gives people with a disability

a chance to enjoy doing something that so many without disabilities enjoys and provides a great sense of achievement. It helps break down the barrier between what they can and what they cannot do. One volunteer in South Australia put it this way: 'We don't see the riders' disabilities; we see their abilities.'

RDA would not be able to offer such an extraordinary service and outcomes without its volunteers. There are 460 of them registered in South Australia, including coaches, side-walkers and horse leaders, as well as those who maintain the properties and take care of the horses the year round. They undergo training to achieve a National Coaching Accreditation Scheme qualification, which is approved by Ausport. 'Side-walkers' is an unusual description but an apt one. They stay beside the horse as a person is riding. That helps keep the rider safe and offers support and encouragement. Horse leaders are responsible for the horse during a riding lesson, and look after the horses when they are not being used in lessons. The effort and dedication of these volunteers, like that of so many volunteers in so many organisations, is amazing and it is something that we should all try to emulate in making a contribution in our communities.

The many success stories of RDA are what I find most inspiring. I would like to share a few with you. The story I mentioned at the start of my speech is just one of many stories about RDA helping to improve the lives of people with disabilities. A young South Australian rider joined RDA at the age of four. He has cerebral palsy and Down syndrome and was unable to sit up straight. With ongoing therapy over four years, he is now able to sit up unaided at the age of eight. His mum said that RDA was the best thing she ever did for her son.

A young woman with just one per cent vision in the bottom of one eye joined RDA at Jennibrook Farm a few years ago, because she wanted to get involved in some form of physical activity. She initially joined RDA as a non-rider. But for the last two years she has competed in the state dressage championships and now has dreams of competing nationally. In writing about her RDA experience, she said: 'Horse riding has been so valuable to me. It has helped me gain confidence. It keeps me fit and, quite honestly, gives me something to

live for.' That is quite amazing: it gives her something to live for.

Another young female RDA rider from South Australia, who became a paraplegic after falling from a pony at the age of 12, represented Australia six years later in the equestrian dressage at the 2008 Paralympic Games. She hopes to compete in London in 2012. That is the impact that RDA can have on individuals. For many RDA riders, competing at the Paralympics is not their goal and is not why they go there. But each of them has a dream or a goal, however small, and RDA can help them to achieve that. The three stories that I mentioned are just three examples of what RDA has been able to do for people with disabilities. They are just three stories from an enormous pool of outstanding successes.

RDA also offers the families of the riders a chance to watch their loved ones enjoying physical activity, receiving therapy and having a lot of fun at the same time. Riders, like all young people, are happy to show their parents and families their potential, their achievements and what they are capable of. As a volunteer from Port Lincoln in South Australia stated: 'I remember well a competition that was held for disabled riders at the Port Lincoln show. Some parents were watching their children in action for the first time. When they realised their children's capabilities, their looks of amazement and their tears of joy were enough to make me tearful too and know that our efforts are worth while.

Despite its outstanding success and the impact that RDA has on so many people's lives, it needs support. RDA does receive some government funding. It also relies on fundraising from the local community. But there are a number of extensive challenges that I would like to help the RDA with because any organisation that shows people with disabilities what they can do and provides them with an opportunity to experience things they never dreamt of experiencing should receive as much support as possible.

One of the areas where the RDA would like to improve its services in South Australia is to be able to offer indoor areas, or under-shelter areas, so they can operate all year round. The first challenge is to equip a couple of centres, or maybe even one, with even a partly sheltered riding area. This does not have to be fully enclosed but just needs to be something that would enable riders to participate in this activity in inclement weather.

It is a relatively small amount of money. A few hundred thousand dollars for an organisation like RDA, which touches so many lives and offers so many benefits, can actually make such a scheme a reality. It is a shame, in a time of abundance when a lot of

public money is flowing and there are all sorts of claims and counterclaims about what is worthy and what is not, that organisations like RDA—organisations that contribute to the lives of those who are struggling, organisations that offer something to live for, as one young rider suggested—do not receive a great deal more benefit.

I understand that governments have to make priorities but, in making an assessment of where public funds should go, I think there needs to be a more considered approach to supporting organisations like RDA. It is my sincere hope, not just as a South Australian, that RDA in South Australia will eventually be able to put up shelters in one or more of these centres so that they can continue their good work come rain, hail or shine.

In conclusion, Riding for the Disabled does not just provide horse-riding lessons for people with a disability. It gives them an experience brimming with fun, therapeutic value, independence and achievement. Whether their riding takes them to the Paralympics or no further than their local horse enclosure, through RDA people with disabilities get to show the world what they can do and that is what it is all about.