



## Transformed Through Therapeutic Driving

*By Tineke Jacobsen*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TINEKE JACOBSEN

In June 2010, a mother contacted me about finding a therapeutic horsemanship experience for her daughter, Stefanie. When I first met Stefanie Putnam, she was a kind, somewhat timid but lovely, intelligent young lady. An injury in the summer of 2009 resulted in quadriplegia and Stefanie became a wheelchair user, with very limited use of gross motor function in her upper extremities and virtually no fine motor hand function. Stefanie needed a corset to help her

stay upright in her wheelchair and to breathe. Her core strength and balance were severely compromised. She communicated well, but her voice lacked volume. Projection and breathing were hard work.

Stefanie had had an eventful, successful equestrian career as a competitive show jumper before her injury, which was not horse related. She had her hopes set on being able to ride again. However, given her current functional level and the early stage in

▲ **Top Left:** Tineke Jacobsen (right), a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor, introduced Stefanie to therapeutic driving. **Bottom Left:** Stefanie leads her horse to the stables to get ready for driving. **Right:** Stefanie Putnam with her trainers, Leslie Berndt and Scott Monroe, both able-bodied international level driving competitors.

her overall rehabilitation program, I strongly advised her to first pursue



therapeutic driving and told her about Michael Muir, great-grandson of early visionary conservationist, John Muir. Challenged by multiple sclerosis, Muir was directing a therapeutic driving program called Access Adventure that might be suitable for Stefanie.

## A Changed Person

Almost two years post-injury, I met Stefanie again at a facility where she is now driving on her own, and I saw a very different young woman. She called to me with a loud voice and rapidly came over in her chair. Her skin looked radiant, and her eyes twinkled. As she spoke, she moved about in her chair using arm motions to further express her speech. Her whole demeanor radiated vitality and self-confidence. Positive energy flowed from her entire being.

She said that the therapeutic driving program was absolutely the best possible choice for her given her level of disability. The program had introduced her to a whole new realm of possibilities for people with disabilities that she hopes to share with others. It truly transformed her world. After a year of using a carriage that accommodated her wheelchair, she now drives on par with able-bodied drivers.

Using a special adaptive seat for body stability designed by Aspen Seating in Denver, CO, for athletes with disabilities, Stefanie has moved into a competition marathon carriage. This carriage is used for one of the three phases of combined driving or horse driving trials. She also uses custom leather wrist cuffs that snap onto the reins because she has no feeling or functionality in her hands. She is now driving three to four times a week on her own with the support of her parents, who have also learned to drive, and with various trainers such as Leslie Berndt and Scott Monroe, both able-bodied international level competitors.



"When I am carriage driving, people do not even realize that I have a disability, and I can forget as well. I am able to feel at one with the horse just like when I was able to ride. It is a wonderful feeling of connection, independence and empowerment."

## New Equestrian Goals

For the past two years Stefanie has competed successfully in many able-bodied competitions with her parents' and trainers' support. She is an active driver with United States Driving for the Disabled (USDFD at <http://usdfd.org>) and is hoping to qualify for the World Para-Equestrian team. This past year USDFD made a video about her, "Driving Hope Forward," which can be viewed at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wPgwqxTcWc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wPgwqxTcWc). Because Stefanie is physically and psychologically benefiting so much from therapeutic driving, she has been able to discontinue some of the other medical therapies in which she was previously involved.

Stefanie and I were invited to speak at a local Rotary Club meeting where she explained: "When I came out of my injury two years ago, I was told that horses would never be a part of my life again. Many people in my

## Stefanie and her trainers negotiating a course as she trains for able-bodied driving competitions.

situation with quadriplegia, paraplegia or other disabilities are told that they have to do something else, that they can't continue with the dreams they had before. But I was able to create goals through therapeutic driving. I was able to come out of myself, move beyond my disability and bring a lot more life to my heart again. It had to do with learning how to communicate with my new body, how to better use and strengthen my remaining functionality and how to feel 'normal' again, in a sense."

Stefanie expresses the freedom she now feels with horses: "When I am carriage driving, people do not even realize I have a disability, and I can forget as well. I am able to feel at one with the horse just like when I was able to ride. It is a wonderful feeling of connection, independence and empowerment."

This young lady exudes hope, joy and transcendence. She has come to terms with a tragic injury and has not allowed it to define her. Today she is moving forward with her dreams, which also include public speaking and completing a master's degree at a local university. She hopes to be a role model for other people with special needs and promote the concept of therapeutic driving (and carriage driving in general) as an avenue for well-being and transformation. Her continuing, incredible journey is an inspiration to everyone around her.

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