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## Changing Lives Through Therapeutic Riding

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**Jim Flanagan, brother of Deborah Flanagan-Thornton and scholarship funder, Christine Vertin, NEC scholarship recipient Davis Vertin, David Vertin and Kennedy Vertin. Contributed**

**Naples** — Davis Vertin, 17, walked slowly beside the young man and his horse. Vertin was responsible for the safety of both the rider and the horse. It was Vertin's volunteer day at the Naples Equestrian Challenge (NEC) where riders from two years old and up with special needs experience a unique therapy through their relationship with horses.

"That day gave me one of my most memorable experiences," said Vertin. "He expressed his gratitude for the help I provided and his joy filled my heart." Many of the student riders have difficulty communicating and their riding experience often enables them to develop new abilities.

Vertin began volunteering two years ago at NEC, 206 Ridge Drive in North Naples, as a member of Mother Francis de Sales Auxiliary for the homeless. For her volunteer requirement, she chose NEC. She believes she received more from the experience than she contributed.

"I learned responsibility at a young age, both for the riders and the animals. I was trained to do everything right for the safety of all. More importantly, I learned not to be judgmental. Special needs students are as happy as any other person with activities they enjoy. It's okay to be different. Everyone is special and unique, something with which many high school students struggle. I am glad my riding students taught me lessons that will benefit me forever," said Vertin.

She will volunteer this summer for the NEC weeklong riding camps that are always filled, popular each year. They include NEC students, their friends and relatives and other riders from the community. During summer camp, they find a common bond with their riding activities and NEC special needs students have the chance to exhibit leadership skills helping new riders.

Missy Saracino, Program Director for the non-profit NEC appreciates the nearly 300 volunteers with whom she works each year. During the NEC 14th Annual Horse Show this year, student riders showed their accomplishments to donors, volunteers, family members and friends, dressed for the occasion.

"Since 2008, we also award an honorary scholarship at the event to a teen graduate volunteer deserving special recognition," said Saracino. "The NEC Scholarship Committee reviewed the applications and voted unanimously in favor of Davis Vertin.

"Vertin is a wonderful young lady and an outstanding volunteer. It was a great pleasure to recognize her as the 'Deb PT' Teen Scholarship recipient at the Annual NEC Horse Show in the amount of \$500.00." She will attend the University of Central Florida.

The scholarship award honors Deborah Flanagan Thornton, a former dedicated volunteer and physical therapist who refers students. The scholarship is funded by her brother in her honor to encourage teen participation as volunteers at NEC.

NEC annually serves approximately 400 children and adults, with about 150 in therapeutic horseback riding each week. Kim Minarich, Executive Director, is currently engaged in an expansion campaign that will allow for more riders. The Annual NEC Horse Show provided a chance for riders to celebrate their success. More information is at [naplesequestrianchallenge.org](http://naplesequestrianchallenge.org)



**Danny and Pickett at NEC Horse Show. Contributed**