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The Jefferson Award: Justice and Pope set the disabled astride

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Each week, **The Chronicle** features a Bay Area resident who has won a Jefferson Award for making a difference in his or her community. The awards are administered by the American Institute for Public Service, a national foundation established in 1972 to honor community service. Bay Area residents profiled in **The Chronicle** will also be featured on CBS5-TV and KCBS-AM, which -- along with **The Chronicle** -- are Jefferson Award media partners.

Bay Area Jefferson Award winners: Lee Justice and Robert Pope, co- founders of Giant Steps Therapeutic Riding Center, a Petaluma horseback-riding program for children with disabilities.

How they started: Pope and Justice, who married in 1991, were enjoying their retirement after moving from the Bay Area to Montana, where they raised horses. One day a friend told them about the benefits of horseback riding for children with physical and mental disabilities. Although neither Pope nor Justice had any disabled family members or friends, they realized they had the time and resources to create a therapeutic riding center -- an idea that felt right to them. In 1996, they sold their ranch and brought their 12 horses to Petaluma. They spent the next two years building three barns, a riding arena and a training arena on 23 acres. They moved their offices into a small home on the property, got their nonprofit status approved and looked for a staff. "One day, someone -- I'll never know who -- put a blurb in a cerebral palsy support group newsletter, and the phone started ringing off the hook. It hasn't stopped," said Pope. The first classes started in 1998 with five riders.

And now: There are now 50 riders enrolled in weekly sessions in the year- round program and a waiting list of 50. The riders have all forms of physical, emotional and mental challenges, including multiple sclerosis, autism, Down syndrome and attention deficit disorder. The center has more than 250 volunteers, and most riders have a safety walker on each side of the horse and a walker in front to lead the horse. The horses are Tennessee Walkers, which have a smooth gait that makes it easier for those with balance problems to ride. Pope says the next goal is to build a covered arena to prevent disruptions in the riders' regimes.

Their inspiration: Pope says the impact the center has had on its riders is more profound than he or Justice envisioned. "We had this idea, but what makes the center is the parents, staff, volunteers and horses," says Pope. "The horses know they have someone special on their back. The horses -- and the riders -- do things that defy imagination." Their vitals: Pope, 66, is a San Francisco native with three grown children from a previous marriage. Justice, 53, was born in Virginia. She has a degree in biology from the University of Arizona and is a certified riding instructor. Who has had the most impact: Pope says all the riders have left a mark on the couple, but the first, Nicholas, showed them that the impact they wanted was possible. Nicholas had terminal cancer at age 7. Pope and Justice knew riding wasn't going to change his condition, and

allowing him to participate in a program geared toward improvement rather than enjoyment wasn't what they had planned. "But all he ever wanted to do in his life was ride a horse," said Pope. Nicholas continued to ride, but he kept getting weaker, and one day he didn't come back. "We heard later that he had gone to Texas for an experimental treatment and it worked," said Pope. "I'd love to say the riding helped, but I believe any type of illness can be assisted by the mind of the person who has it."

What they say: "We aren't teaching equestrian skills here," said Pope. "We want the riding to have an added therapeutic value to focus on particular issues the riders have. It's not about feeling better by riding a horse, it's about getting better by riding a horse."

What others say about them: "They have put their heart and soul into this program," said Lois Dilley, whose 10-year-old son, D.J., has cerebral palsy. D.J. was wheelchair-bound when he started the program when he was 4½ years old; within three months, he took his first step. "Now I hear his teacher scolding him for running in the classroom. With this program, he truly made giant steps." Dilley said the couple's energy is boundless, as is the caring they have for the riders and their families. "With everything they have going on, they make time to write my 13-year-old daughter a thank-you letter for the sacrifice she made when we went to a function for D.J. and missed a recital for her," said Dilley. "They see the results, and they want to keep it going."

To find out more: Call (707) 769-8900 or visit www.giantstepsriding.org.