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## The 'Heart of the West' Beats On

**By Annemarie Donkin**  
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**On the back of a horse, a child's disability is invisible.**

*--Carousel Ranch*

There is something very special about watching a child on a horse, especially because they are usually grinning from ear to ear. To create more happy smiles, nearly 800 people gathered on a picture perfect evening at the magnificent Blomgren Family Ranch on Sierra Highway to celebrate the 10th Annual "Heart of the West" dinner, auction and casino night to benefit Carousel Ranch, a nonprofit therapeutic riding program in Agua Dulce. It was a real "hoe-down" theme, with the ranch decorated end to end with bales of hay and Western props and guests all dressed up in their country best.

Before dinner, swarms of attendees gathered around the silent auction tables. Bidding was brisk for the nearly 320 items donated by nearly every business in the Santa Clarita Valley - from first class trips to exotic locations, furniture, artwork, jewelry, electric bicycles, a leather sofa, Dodgers and Clippers tickets, health club memberships and goodie bags of all kinds. It seemed the Biejo bags were still the most popular items, as several ladies hovered around them to make sure they won the best one - this year's gem was the tiny pink French purse.

Jeanna Crawford, the event chairwoman and recently named 2007 SCV Woman of the Year, said there were more items in the back, but she didn't have enough room to display everything. She also said there were 100 more people attending this year, creating headaches for the valet parking. Crawford said every year they have even more items donated to the live auction.

"This is a problem everyone should have," Crawford quipped. "We are truly blessed."

Equestrian Demonstration

At about 6:30 p.m., the equestrian demonstration began, featuring a few of the clients of

Carousel Ranch. The children and young people showed everyone what Carousel Ranch is all about. Participating this year were Allie Hill, Marie Osborn, Neil Fishkin, Sydney Pearson and one of the stars of Carousel Ranch, 20-year-old Dana Sachs.

Sachs was born with no arms but seems to have no limits. A junior at California State University, Northridge, she has ridden for 16 years and now rides without assistance, reining Baby the mule with her feet like the champion horsewoman she is. At the CALNET horse show at the Burbank Equestrian Center in April, Sachs received three first-place awards and one second-place award in addition to the 2007 Chris Ludwig "Excellence Rider Award."

First time attendees to "Heart of the West" were astonished by what they saw. As the children, many with severe disabilities, rode through an obstacle course, Murray Siegel, immediate past president of Carousel Ranch, gave a touching commentary on each child's accomplishments gained through the program.

"Animal assisted therapy uses the unique emotional bond that connects animals with humans to stimulate the body, the mind and the spirit of those with physical, emotional, or mental impairments," he said. "At Carousel Ranch, we use horses to provide some unique therapeutic opportunities for special needs riders. The riders have disabilities ranging from sensory-impairments and visual and auditory deficits to cerebral palsy, autism and psychological disorders. And remember, they're not just bouncing up and down while they walk in circles around an arena. The kids who come to Carousel Ranch are vaulting - they're doing gymnastics on the back of a moving horse. This is an effective form of physical therapy."

TimBen Boydston, a councilman for the City of Santa Clarita, was overwhelmed by the demonstration and said there were other moist eyes in the audience.

"Carousel Ranch does such an incredible job of bringing kids with special needs into the mainstream," he said. "They value human beings and the majesty of horses, and what they have created is so beautiful. A horse's heart is three times as large as a that of a human, but the donors who make Carousel Ranch a reality have hearts 10 times as large."

### Lamborghini and a Puppy

After the demonstration, guests settled at tables decorated with red bandanas and bright sunflower centerpieces from Fleurish Fine Flowers.

RSVP -The Catering Company served up a lovely dinner of fresh salad, braised short ribs of beef and veggies. Babe's Dessert Bar donated the yummy, tiny cheesecakes. Then, the hammer went up for the live auction. To add to the cute factor, volunteers

brought out Shadow, an adorable 10-week-old black lab puppy, who was soft as velvet.

"You can't pet the puppy unless you bid on him," teased the auctioneer. No worries. The son of Starlight, one of the finest labs in Southern California, the perky pup went to a wonderful home for \$2,000. Other notable items sold were a week at the Loose Goose Wine Festival for \$2,000 and one week at the Sanctuary in Costa Rica for \$7,250.

Exotic Motor Works donated a 24-hour rental of a 2007 Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder - bought for only \$1,750. But the most money raised was for the Fund-A-Need program, with sponsorships ranging from \$150 to \$5,000 for the children and horses of Carousel Ranch.

Wayne and Dianne Crawford, of Santa Clarita Concrete, sponsored this year's head table and quickly anted up a cool \$20,000 for next year's head table.

John Knight, of Knight Building Systems, was also at the head table, with his wife, Marcy. They purchased the trip to Mammoth Mountain and a Carousel Ranch sponsorship for \$1,500.

"We are loyal supporters," John Knight said. "It is a great charity."

## The Evening

Jeanna Crawford tearfully addressed the guests during dinner, most of whom were family and friends of the sponsors, with about half of them attending "Heart of the West" for the first time.

"We are here to celebrate miracles and milestones," she said. "Carousel Ranch is really an extended family. We laugh, we cry, we care and strive together but the magic word is 'together.'"

By all accounts, since 2004, Jeanna Crawford has been credited with transforming the "Heart of the West" from a modest fundraiser into a powerhouse that last year brought in about \$250,000.

"All of the money goes directly to the kids," said Denise Tomey, executive director and co-founder of Carousel Ranch. Because all of the food, services, facilities, silent and live auction items are donated, Tomey said the cost to put on "Heart of the West" is minimal.

Preliminary numbers indicated this year's live auction brought in about \$153,000. Tomey said before Jeanna took over as event chair, they had never made more than \$1,500.

"I have never worked for someone like Jeanna," Tomey said. "She told us four years ago we would make \$100,000 and we didn't believe it, but now we believe her. She made it happen and did everything she said she would do."

Tomey also had tremendous praise for everyone who contributed to this year's event.

"We couldn't do what we do without the community support and our volunteers, it is almost overwhelming," Tomey said. "People join us in our passion and not a day goes by that we couldn't do without their support. It takes hundreds of people to put on this event and every year more people get involved. It is greater than we ever envisioned."

To finish out the evening, J & M Entertainment cranked up the country music and folks hit the dance floor for some line dancing and country boogie. Others headed to the "casino night" set up in the "Old Western" town on the ranch.

### Carousel Ranch

In 1997, Tomey and co-founder Becky Graham started the therapeutic riding program for mentally and physically challenged kids in a backyard with one horse. "Both Becky and I had worked for another program for 12 years before starting Carousel Ranch. She and I had both been doing it over 20 years," Tomey said. Last year Carousel Ranch moved into its permanent home on a 10-acre ranch on Rocking Horse Road in Agua Dulce. Title Sponsor Mission Valley Bank helped finance the purchase. Currently the Ranch serves 86 children with weekly, half-hour lessons.

"It is a far cry from 10 years ago, with only family and friends. We started with five students," she said.

Tomey said the ranch has a one-year waiting list for new children, but she suggests signing up kids anyway because a year passes quickly.

Yet, she said their wish list still includes a covered arena to allow the kids to ride in comfort all year long.

Wayne Crawford is chair of the \$1.5 million capital campaign to raise the funds and make sure it happens. Tomey said Carousel Ranch also receives grants through private foundations that comprise about 10 percent of the budget.

As people began to leave with their auction items and centerpieces, Jeanna Crawford summed up the special magic of the evening. "It's been a great honor to give my time and effort for such a phenomenal cause," she said. "It's such a beautiful event and perhaps even just a little divine."

*For more information about Carousel Ranch, contact Denise Tomey, (661) 268- 8010, DTomey2777@aol.com or [www.carouselranch.org](http://www.carouselranch.org).*

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