

Where the horses are the healers



Festina Lente in Bray, Co Wicklow combines a walled garden with an equestrian centre, where people with intellectual disabilities can interact with the horses through therapeutic riding and working in the stables, writes **SYLVIA THOMPSON**

THE LOW-key entrance to Festina Lente belies the hidden wealth of services to individuals and the community that goes on in the equestrian centre, walled gardens and allotments on the 32-acre site just off the Old Connaught Avenue in Bray, Co Wicklow.

Hasten Slowly is the literal translation of Festina Lente, and perhaps the name itself best conjures up the essence of a social enterprise such as this.

Originally set up over 15 years ago as a riding school for people with intellectual disabilities, Festina Lente has developed into two distinct businesses. First, the restored walled gardens and the equestrian centre, employing 18 people, many of whom might otherwise never have had a job. The garden shop – selling plants and gardening tools for those renting allotments on the site – is the most recent addition to the business.

“There are many different dimensions to the enterprises, but most of all they are value for money – they provide employment and are community-focused,” says Jill Carey, the chief executive of Festina Lente, whose office is a portakabin stacked on top of the garden centre headquarters.

Carey explains how Festina Lente receives funding from the Department of Social Protection to provide jobs for people who are at risk of social or economic exclusion through disability or long-term unemployment.

“It works on the basis that for every one euro the Department of Social Protection gives us, the social enterprise has to generate one euro or more,” she says. “Essentially, we get a minimum wage contribution for each person that works here and we also got an unwaged grant of €5,000 per person per year from 2001 to 2010. It’s harder now but you just work more at rebranding, repackaging and remarketing.”

A social enterprise is a business set up to tackle social, economic or environmental disadvantage. The aim of the business is to offer employment to people who are excluded from mainstream employment while also being commercially successful. Various public and private funding bodies support social enterprises including the Department of Social Protection.

Across Europe, the social enterprise sector is one of the fastest growing areas of entrepreneurship and accounts for between 4 and 7 per cent of GDP. It accounts for about 3 per cent of GDP in Ireland, according to *Adding Value Delivering Change — the Role of Social Enterprise in National Recovery*, a report from the Social Enterprise Task Force.

Whether we’re in an economic boom or bust, there will always be a need for supported employment. But the curious thing is that Festina Lente has such a strong sense of valuing its workers and volunteers, and work – rather than people’s problems – is the central focus of everyone’s day.

The interaction with horses, too, is central to the motivation of those who work, volunteer or come for riding lessons at Festina Lente. The equestrian centre is currently running a pilot programme to train instructors in therapeutic riding.

Lorraine Fitzpatrick is one of the trainees on the programme. “I was around horses a lot until my late teens. I have a brother who is autistic and I was aware how he connected more with reality when he was around horses. It’s fascinating work. You go with the flow and do what needs to be done.”

The pilot project that Fitzpatrick is on will become an official therapeutic riding training programme open to new students in October.

There are also some students on work placements at Festina Lente. Sarah Ginty, a second-year social studies student at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, is one such student. “I’m interested in learning about body language with horses and I hope to learn about therapeutic riding for people with disabilities. I have a hearing disability myself and I’d like to work with people with autism and Down syndrome,” she says.

Festina Lente also runs what’s called a supported helper programme in which young people work with the horses alongside staff (see panel).

“We also use equine-assisted learning as a management development programme in the corporate sector and we run camps for children and more recently mothers and daughters,” says Carey.

“Our business is people and by working with and understanding horses, we can understand the challenges people face. Horses are a great mediator for children with difficulties. The horse doesn’t give a toss whether they are in or out of school, overweight or underweight.

The children are accepted as they are and they get on with the practical work around horses with a sense of achievement about everything they do.”

Meanwhile, the gardeners are at work pruning roses, growing bulbs for the shop and germinating sweet peas for a forthcoming flower show. Horticulturist Bobby Smith has been working here for about six months now. “It takes a bit of getting used to, working with people with learning disabilities. You need to have a lot of patience but when you realise what people are good at, you can get them going on the right jobs,” he says.

See also socialenterprise.ie, festinalente.ie

'Here he listens to the staff and does what he is told'

Adam Farrelly (6) walks into the stable yards, dressed in dark blue waterproof gear and matching Spider-Man wellies, with a big smile on his face. He’s all set to go, ready to spend the morning “at work” in Festina Lente. “He calls it his job,” says his mother, Lisa Farrelly, whose relief at having found a safe, happy environment within which Adam can spend time is palpable.

Less than two years ago, riding lessons at Festina Lente were prescribed for Adam, who was diagnosed with ADHD and behavioural problems. Since then, he has been coming here every chance he gets – during the Christmas, Easter and summer holidays and soon on Saturdays for the supported helper programme.

Today, his tasks for the morning include grooming Prince. The gentle, dark brown pony stands calmly while Adam brushes him with big circular strokes, removing dust and excess hair from the pony’s back. Next, he leads Prince out of the yard, up the hill to the sensory trail, chatting to Leda Connaughton, his support worker, all the way. Other jobs include mucking out the stables, sweeping the yard, making hay nets and hard feeds for the horses, and bringing the horses back down from the field.

“I gave up work two years ago because my Ma found it too much looking after Adam. If he doesn’t want to do something he starts hitting out and throwing things, but here he listens to the staff and does what he is told,” says Lisa.

Being outdoors in an open space seems to be a key part of Adam’s enjoyment of working at Festina Lente. “Walk on, Prince,” he instructs the pony as he guides him through the water, over the stones, up over a small wooden bridge and back down through the fields to the stable yard.

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