

# Riding Her Way to Recovery

By Carine Nadel

On December third, 1970 at age 39, Martha Elliot had a major stroke-7 weeks after having had brain surgery. At the time, she was teaching music at Southern California College, played concert piano, she was married and a mom. She had no idea how serious her situation was until a doctor informed her family that she probably would never walk again-and if she did it would be with the help of being in a full body cast. She had lost the use of her left side.

The good news is-this information didn't slow Martha down. Nope, this spunky woman found help at what is now the Shea Therapeutic Equestrian Center in San Juan Capistrano. The caring people there helped her on her long road to recovery. While the use of her left side remains an issue, Elliot, now approaching 80, teaches private music about 10 hours a week, has music adapted for her so she continues to be a concert pianist and two years ago she went back to riding.

"I really found that I missed riding and all it offered me. So one hour a week I make the trip from my home in Santa Ana to San Juan Capistrano to join the physical therapists and volunteers at the Shea to work at improving myself. I found that I really missed being able to get up on a horse and work at strengthening my body.

"Believe it or not, I have seen new improvement over the last couple of years. And I just love the horse that I've been lucky enough to be assigned too. His name is Notabene. I don't know if you can call a horse cuddly, but he is! He knows my voice

and he comes up and snuggles with me! He's a beautiful thoroughbred.

"We've made an excellent dressage team. Dressage is very difficult-it's essentially a very prescribed and memorized course that the rider and the horse have to go through. It really takes a lot out of me physically-I have to use certain muscles and parts of my body that are weak. So when we're going through our paces and workouts I get pretty tired. In fact, I'm exhausted. But I love every minute of it and can hardly wait to get there every week!

"In 2008, in my first return to competition, I was so giddy with excitement-Notabene and I had the highest score! I kept hearing all the names being called out for awards and never dreamed after 26 years of being away that I'd win the blue ribbon!"

With her background, when Martha hears others in her age bracket say things like "I'm too old to try something new" or "I'm done-I just want to rest"-she has quite strong opinions that she shared by saying, "That is just dumb, dumb, dumb! Life has so much to offer. I'd like to try writing a book, painting. You will never find me just sitting in a rocking chair. That's for sure. You've got to remain active. I still work. My husband is blind-so while I'd like to travel, the driving would be left up to me, so we don't do long trips. But we like to be around groups of people and in an exciting atmosphere. Our son, Christian Elliot is a popular musician and we're involved in all

of his performances.

"I also feel you've got to get out there and help others-that's a blessing. Teaching for me is a way of helping others. I love my students. I have kids and adults. I like to say I work with beginners of all ages."

As for her feelings about how the Shea Therapeutic Equestrian Center fits in to her plans?

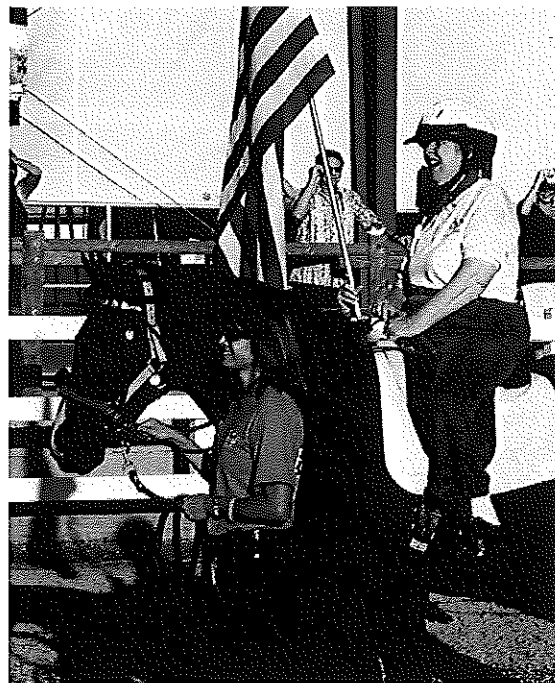
"I love the entire community of volunteers. They all give so much to everyone who comes there. Physically and emotionally-as soon as you walk onto the campus you feel yourself brighten up with the love they give. They have planned activities designed to improve your health. My left side is paralyzed but believe it or not, with their constant encouraging help and guidance, I've begun to feel it coming back!

"There's such a feeling of love and peace. If someone wants to make a difference, they should try volunteering even an hour a week. I say give them a call!" And Martha's outlook on life?

"Oh that's an easy one-First say a prayer, then keep on laughing! Laughter helps to cover a lot of heartache."

If anyone is interested in finding out more about the Shea Thera-

peutic Equestrian Center to join the group of volunteers or if you know of anyone who might benefit from the therapy they offer go to [sheacenter.org](http://sheacenter.org) or call 949-240-8441.



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