

Patty McGill: Maverick on a mission

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1 / 5 Patty McGill and Kirkland Gates, who is autistic and non-verbal, work together at Hinchinbrook Farm, in this scene from the documentary *Free Reins*, airing on CBC TV on Thursday at 9 p.m. (FREE REINS)

The first time Jackie Torrens visited Hinchinbrook Farm, Patty McGill was giving a horse a bath — at her kitchen sink.

Different is normal at the farm in Blockhouse, on Nova Scotia's South Shore, where McGill, 63, runs a therapeutic riding program for 25 to 30 autistic families.

Torrens introduces viewers to the "maverick on a mission" in [Free Reins](#), an hour-long documentary that has its world broadcast premiere on Thursday at 9 p.m. on Firsthand on CBC TV.

Among McGill's "tribe" of children with special needs are: Kirkland Gates, a 19-year-old non-verbal autistic man, whom the world at large has given up on communicating with; Roze McDormand, a 14-year-old autistic girl who acts like a horse as she struggles with emotional management and Jaime Collicutt, whose seizure disorder makes speaking and remembering extremely difficult.

Writer-director Torrens, who has made nine documentaries for radio and TV in eight years, including the acclaimed *My Week on Welfare*, says she was intrigued by the story of an unconventional person who does things unconventionally and "what can we learn from it."

McGill has made a safe place at Hinchinbrook Farm for kids who are considered outsiders, says Torrens.

There are five horses at the farm and as a non-rider, she was initially intimidated by the huge creatures, but in the course of shooting the documentary between August and mid-September last year, she came to be charmed by them — though she hasn't taken up riding.

It was challenging trying to get in the heads of a group of kids whose special needs were in large part communication disorders, Torrens says, adding the families were generous and brave in opening up to her because they have been judged many times by the outside world.

Families play a large role at Hinchinbrook Farm as McGill believes that it is not just a child who is affected by a disorder but the entire family.

Torrens, who felt an affinity with her subject, notes admiringly that "Patty is fearless."

She also finds it interesting that McGill is 63-year-old woman who herself has been discarded by society because of her gender and her age.

"She has a physical disability herself — reflex sympathetic disorder, a neurological disorder that causes her great pain. It gives her particular insight into neurological disorders of the children because she has a disorder herself."



*Patty McGill is
Hinchinbrook
Farm, a
therapeutic
riding
program
where
"different is
normal."
(FREE REINS)*

McGill is
concerned
that kids
with special
needs are
being

contained or warehoused, says Torrens.

"That's not what is going on at Patty's. She has the imagination to come up with new things to try and the effort gives families hope.

"It's not just about riding, but about providing as many positive sensory experiences as possible. Many (of the children) have had negative sensory experiences and she is trying to counterbalance them."

And there are no labels at Hinchinbrook Farms, says co-producer Erin Oakes of Tell Tale Productions.

"(Patty) deals with people as individuals. In an institution you have to have labels. With Patty, you're an individual. Parents hang out with other parents and talk about what's going on with their kids. They are relating to each other and don't have to have a diagnosis.

Roze McDormand, 14, shown with therapy horse Jazzmin at Hinchinbrook Farm, just wants to be a normal teenager. (FREE REINS)

Oakes, who has worked in film for more than 15 years including stints at AFSCOOP and the Atlantic Film Festival, conceived the documentary. She had heard people speak admiringly about McGill and her work a year before she actually met her. After she first visited Hinchinbrook Farm, she began hanging around, trained as a volunteer and brought her eight-year-old daughter and three-year-old son to ride.

She also started developing the documentary with Tell Tale's Edward Peill.

"As I got to meet the families and became familiar with the issues around raising a special needs child, I was overwhelmed by the amount of frustration they felt and the lack of resources," Oakes says, adding



she

believes if people understood what these parents have on their plate, perhaps they wouldn't be so quick to judge the children who behave differently in the supermarket or in school.

"I had never worked with Jackie before, but I liked her aesthetic and I knew we would need a director who had an understanding of being an outsider; had the ability to treat the story with empathy, not sympathy, and would be able to appreciate the positives of the situation. We didn't want a woe-is-me story, but an inspirational story.

She also wanted a director who understands that "not being normal is not a failure, but can be a gift, though a loaded gift that comes at a cost. We found the perfect director."

While the goal was not to make a promotional film, Oakes hopes to raise awareness.

She calls McGill a force of nature and says she finds what McGill is doing to be inspiring.

"It's not easy to be an unconventional thinker," says Torrens. "Patty has paid a high price, but she does it anyway."

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