

Hi, my name is Jo-Anne and I am an instructor with Little Bits.

What started as something to get me out of the house, has turned into one of the greatest joys in my life. At the time, I had two very young children at home. I felt all I was doing was changing diapers and feeding babies. One day, while looking through the paper, I saw an ad for volunteers at Little Bits Riding Club. Right up my alley, kids and horses! I went to the volunteer orientation and signed up to volunteer for the Sunday program. That was way back in the fall of 1987, and it was there I met Esther MacDonald who was the instructor on Sunday at the time. Over that fall session, I became friends with Esther. She told me that in the spring of 1988, Lida McGowan was coming up to do some certifications for the Cheff Center in Augusta, Michigan. She encouraged me to do it, so with a group of people we became certified instructors that spring. A few years later, I went to audit a CanTRA (Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association) certification exam at Marilyn McGhan's. While there, she told me I was not just auditing, but was taking the exam. When the dust settled, I also had my CanTRA Assistant Instructor certification, now called Basic Instructor.

In the spring of 1988, Ester decided not to return as an instructor, and handed the reins over to me with the support of the board of directors. In 1988, the Sunday program ran FOUR, 45-minute lessons, each with 6 riders, starting at 2:00 PM and ending at 5:00 PM. I began calling Linda, who was an instructor on the Thursday evening program, to consult with her and let her know what was going on. Although at the time we didn't work directly with one another, we began to unify the two days, and Little Bits became a more cohesive program. Under Linda's guidance, the program has evolved into what it is today. Lessons are now one hour in length, with a maximum of 5 riders per class. We also increased the number of days we program to Tuesday AM (adult classes), Tuesday PM, Wednesday PM and of course Sunday. I teach all days, except for the Tuesday PM classes. I am however available to sub on Tuesday's and have taught a few sessions on that night, covering a maternity leave for another instructor.

Starting as a volunteer and moving on to be an instructor has allowed me to meet an amazing group of people. The riders and their families have become part of my extended family. When I was pregnant with our last child, one parent was an EMT. I was due at the end of June and we were still programming. Each week, as my due date got closer, he would tell me he had his kit with him just in case I went into labour. Luckily for all, I managed to hold off till after the volunteer appreciation bar-b-que and had a baby boy. That fall, I was back teaching, doing what I loved!

I have worked with a few instructors over the years on Sundays. Dorothy Brewer, Wendy Fraser, Leslie Ouwerkirk, Lorraine McCartney, Pam Russ, Sonja and Evan are some of them. Currently, I have the pleasure of working with Catherine and Cindi on Sunday. One constant, however, has been Ros Schell. She began with Little Bits in 1987 as well and is our barn manager. We could not do our job without her. She makes sure the horses are ready with the appropriate tack to be brought into the arena for the lesson. No small feat when a horse is sick, or tack has to be changed.

I mentioned family, and that is what we are at Little Bits. Instructors became friends, as did volunteers. I have always said that you must be an extraordinary individual to volunteer with Little Bits! The old arena left a lot to be desired. Freezing cold, tropical humidity, raindrops and snow sliding off the roof were not uncommon, depending on the weather outside. Through it all, the volunteers came and walked many hours with the riders, allowing them to enjoy the freedom of being on the back of a horse. When I started at Little Bits, there was talk of a new arena. I never dreamt that in my lifetime I would see the vision come to fruition. Finally, in the summer of 2017 the new arena opened. We have now added a winter program and I am thrilled to be able to teach those new riders.

Little Bits is more than a job for me, it has allowed me to meet wonderful people. Every day is a new experience. Seeing what the riders can do never ceases to amaze me. Who knew that looking for something to get me out of the house would turn into such a fulfilling life?

Thanks to everyone who has made this an incredible journey for me, and I hope to continue until I ride off into the sunset.

