

Horseback hero rescues fallen child in beach accident

By Mark Noack [mark@hmbreview.com]

Riding their bikes along the Coastal Trail, Mark Sipowicz and his 7-year-old son, Leo, were just enjoying a free Sunday morning in late March.

After playing for a bit with their dog in a grove of cypress trees, the two started to bike back north on the cliff trail to the Poplar Street parking lot.

Sipowicz took a right turn to cut away from the cliff edge, and looking back at his son, he felt his heart skip a beat.

Leo was maneuvering his bike to take a jump. What he didn't know was that immediately on the other side, the bluff fell 100 feet to the sandy beach below.

"Because of his height, he didn't know the mound he was going over was right on the edge," Sipowicz recalled. "So I looked down, and there he was down way below, crying and moaning."

Further south on the beach cliffs, Coastsiders Sarah and Al Filice were riding horses, and they remember seeing Sipowicz frantically waving his arms in a panic.

Al Filice is a retired paramedic. Once he learned what had happened, he knew how to act quickly and decisively in an emergency. With a prepared first-aid kit already strapped to his saddle, the 49-year-old galloped his horse down to help the child, arriving far before any other medical aid could get down to the beach.

By the time the fire department got there, Filice had already thoroughly inspected the boy to see how badly he was hurt. Leo had no broken bones, but he had a small gash on his cheek, and a mild chest pain that turned out to be a minor laceration on his liver.

For the most part, Leo was doing well after the plummet — a genuine miracle according to Filice. He was taken to the hospital and was released Thursday night from Stanford Medical Center.

"Leo's lucky he didn't break his neck or get a back injury," he said. "I was really surprised — that was one hell of a fall."

Leo and his father were lucky in more ways than one, according to Sarah Filice. If Leo had fallen in a slightly different direction, he would have hit jagged rocks, not beach sand. Additionally, that morning was the first time Al had brought along his homemade medical kit — a fanny pack that could be strapped to a horse or human.

Sipowicz says it is incredible that the Filices — both volunteers at the San Mateo County Sheriff's Mounted Search and Rescue Unit — were nearby and fully prepared to help out.

"It was remarkable to have Al show up," Sipowicz said. "He came riding up on his horse and he was able to help us, check Leo out, and calm us to a certain extent."

For the last seven years, the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office has operated a special volunteer horseback unit for search and rescue operations. Volunteers such as Filice are trained to offer medical assistance and locate lost persons, all while using the advantages of being on horseback.

According to Casey Terribilini, the volunteer unit's leader, riding horses gives distinct advantages over a

regular rescue operation.

“Horses can cover a large area very quickly, and you’re 10 to 11 feet off the ground, so your visibility is much better,” Terribilini said.

For difficult terrain to drive on, such as sand or rocky hills, Terribilini says a horse can maneuver better and more quickly than even a vehicle with four-wheel drive.

About 30 members belong to the equine group, and another 10 are undergoing training to join. The training takes approximately a year. Both the riders and the horses are prepared to do anything from aiding wounded beachgoers to controlling crowds at public events.

Terribilini says the horses often have the hardest time in training, particularly in learning to stifle their natural inclination to flee from any perceived threat. But during a big event like Dream Machines, every horse needs to be prepared.

“Horses are a huge magnet for kids,” Terribilini said. “So you really have to have their trust to know what they’re going to tolerate.”

So far this year, the unit has participated in six search and rescue operations — a lighter load than usual, according to Terribilini. But springtime and the big influx of visitors to the coast always bring more accidents, he says.

Whenever the unit is out on an assignment, Terribilini says that Filice stands out by riding Mari-Anne, his extraordinarily large Percheron horse that weighs more than a ton.

“When we were patrolling Mavericks this year, I remember my head didn’t even come to Al’s shoulders,” he said. “I ride a pretty good horse, but next to him, it felt like I was riding a miniature.”