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JOURNAL REPORTS

SECOND ACTS

Riding to the Aid of the Disabled

Alicia Kershaw's second career with GallopNYC is about horseback riding as therapy

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Alicia Kershaw didn't plan to retire early from her career as a lawyer. But a move halfway around the world ended up giving her a new mission back home.

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At 45, Ms. Kershaw resigned from her post as a director at Merrill Lynch to take a sabbatical in Hong Kong, where her husband, Peter, had accepted an overseas post. When the couple returned to New York five years later, she considered joining a law firm where she had once worked, but decided against it.

"My heart wasn't in it," says Ms. Kershaw, who raised three children while working full time as a lawyer. "I had discovered new passions in Hong Kong, and I just couldn't bring myself

to start practicing law again."

One of the new interests was volunteering with a therapeutic horseback-riding center. Therapeutic riding helps special-needs children and adults improve physical, emotional, social and cognitive skills.

A 'Life-Changing' Role

"I fell in love with helping kids this way," says Ms. Kershaw, who grew up around horses on a small farm in upstate New York. In addition to working with the children, she was responsible for exercising the horses on trails in the mountains above Hong Kong. "The entire experience was life-changing," she says.



So in 2005, she co-founded GallopNYC, a nonprofit that offers free or low-cost therapeutic riding to about 150 special-needs children (and a few adults) each week across New York City.

Setting up the nonprofit was the easy part; Ms. Kershaw's legal skills came in handy for filing all the necessary paperwork.

Alicia Kershaw *James M. Wilson*

Alicia Kershaw

Home: New York

Age: 60

First/primary career: Corporate lawyer

New path: Executive director of a nonprofit offering therapeutic horseback riding

Why this path: "Every day, I am doing something that brings proven benefits to our riders, and the appreciation we receive from families makes the hard work worth it."

The hard part was finding stables where the children could ride; New York has only four commercial stables. Today, GallopNYC has partnerships with three of them to regularly rent horses for therapy sessions.

At first, few riders signed up. But Ms. Kershaw and her team wrote to special-needs clinics, pediatricians, physical therapists, camps and schools. Now the organization has a long waiting list. The program is open to any child or adult who could benefit from its services, but more than 95% of the riders are youngsters. Half have autism. Others have Down syndrome, sensory-processing or attention-deficit disorders, or other disabilities.

Money to Raise

More than two-thirds of the riders receive services free or at reduced cost, with higher-income families paying \$50 per lesson. That means Ms. Kershaw, in her role of executive director, spends much of her time fundraising.

"I'm one of those people who thought, 'I can do anything except raise money,' but here I am overseeing grant proposals and asking for donations," says Ms. Kershaw, who works about 70 hours a week running GallopNYC. The organization has four full-time employees, eight part-time riding instructors and well over 100 active volunteers. Ms. Kershaw doesn't draw a salary.

"The most rewarding thing is to see the kids connect with the horses," she says. "When they're on the horses, they are calm, focused and at peace. For so many of our kids, riding has transformed their lives."

Second Acts looks at the paths people are taking in their 50s and beyond. Kristi Essick, the author of these articles, is a writer in California. You can reach her, and tell us how you're starting over, at encore@wsj.com.

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