



Shelley White rides Magdalena in a field at Baraka Arabians Farm, the property near Brewerton that she built with her husband, Tom DeSalvia. White rises early to feed the horses before going to Upstate University Hospital, where she is director of patient access services, which provides information and support to patients and their families during the admission process.

PHOTOS BY SUSAN KAHN

Saddling up for good health

Horsewoman finds riding helps her battle immune condition

BY SUSAN KEETER

It was the free ice cream that got little Shelley White to the Mother's Day Horse Show in Phoenix, New York, every year. Her best friend was "horse-crazy," but not her. Then, at age 12, White had a change of heart that she can't fully explain. She woke up on Mother's Day and thought, "I've got to see the horses." She went to the show, alone, talked with riders and owners and learned about their horses. The next day, she took her first lesson.

At the time, White had difficulty walking. When she mounted the saddle, it hurt to put her feet in the stirrups. White had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at age 2 and was a regular Upstate patient by the time she was 12. She was part of several juvenile rheumatology clinical research trials and had had her first partial joint replacement surgery at age 16. Since then, White has had five other joint replacements, including one surgery that gave her a French-made custom ankle.

Today, White is an award-winning horsewoman with four champion half-Arabians and a 44-acre farm. She credits the strenuous exercise and discipline of training horses with keeping her healthy and skilled at her job at Upstate University Hospital. "When you and your horse are in tune, it looks effortless. But I'm exercising my entire core — torso, hips, shoulders — to communicate with the horse I'm riding. It's a workout. The focus and discipline I've developed make me



White with Magdalena, the half Arabian champion she raised and trained.

better at creating hospital plans and supervising the 200 Upstate staffers who make sure our patients get the access they need."

What is White's advice about living with a chronic medical condition? "If you have an immune condition, find something you're passionate about. You need the physical exercise. Try to stay fit and strong. Avoid letting the disease take over. If I hadn't found equestrian sports as an outlet, at 55, I'd be in a very different place, healthwise." [u](#)