

# Combating Social Phobia With OPRC

By Shiela Haviland, with Sandra Cooke

**F**OR MONTHS AFTER I JOINED the Formidable Founders chapter of the Old People's Riding Club (OPRC) in mid-2005, I lacked the courage to attend its activities or meetings. I'm one of thousands of people who struggle with "social phobia" (also called "social anxiety disorder"), a problem that makes meeting and interacting with any group of new people a terrifying prospect because of the self-consciousness and anxiety it arouses. The problem had gotten more acute for me as I grew older.

I'd hoped that I'd be able to attend some OPRC activities by going with a friend of mine who is also a member. But our schedules never seemed to be in sync—so I ended up staying home.

Then I received an e-mail seeking chapter members interested in forming a drill team. I knew immediately that this was something I would enjoy, if I could deal with my fears. I responded before I could change my mind—and as soon as I hit the "send" button, I felt my anxiety level shoot up.

I talked myself out of taking my own mare to the first drill-team practice. I decided to take my daughter's rock-solid gelding, Blaze, instead, because I knew I wouldn't have to worry about any wackiness from him. But I was so nervous when I unloaded him at the practice location that he picked up on my anxiety. He started looking all around for the scary monster that he expected was causing it.

I finally got Blaze saddled and walked him to the indoor ring where the practice would take place. The other riders were already there, warming up their

horses. At the mounting block, I put my foot in the stirrup, swung my leg over ... and my momentum carried me clear across the saddle and off on the other side, where I landed with a thud in the arena sand.

For someone who'd been worried about what others would think of her, this was like a nightmare come true.

A woman on a black-and-white Pinto (later I learned she was OPRC founder and Formidable Founders member Hope Jacob) rode over and asked if I was all right. Another member offered help. All I wanted was to blend in.



Formidable Founders drill team members include (from left) Hope Jacob on Mrs. Bigelow, Maren McMichael on Tristan, author Shiela Haviland on Blazen Trails, and Gee Hagen Wood on Harley.

Back on the mounting block, I jumped into the saddle, without even using the stirrup this time, and rode Blaze over to the group. I was welcomed without a mention of my unusual mounting techniques.

The practice session that followed was a blur to me. But I do remember Hope complimenting my riding—and asking my opinion on drill-team patterns as if I had always been part of the group.

I felt a mess on the drive home (social phobia makes people very self-critical after any social encounter). But I also felt OK. That was because of the way Hope and the rest of the group had

simply accepted me and kept on with the drill-team program, as if things like my mounting snafu happened all the time—and so what?

My next OPRC hurdle was a chapter meeting (unmounted) at Hope's house. Because I felt comfortable with Hope by this time, I focused on staying close to her. And while sitting quietly and listening to the conversations around me, I came to recognize that everyone there wanted the same thing I did: to enjoy the others' company and just have fun. No one was measuring me up, or ignoring me, because I was new.

The people there represented quite a range of ages and riding experience. After listening to members' stories about crazy things they'd done over the years, and laughing with them, I knew I would be fine. I fit right in!

As a Pony Club mom, I had followed my daughter from rally to rally for years. Now I had found a club for me—one with a structured rating system, similar to the one used by the US Pony Clubs, that would help me overcome a psychological problem and

focus on my own riding goals. This column is my way of letting all of you at Formidable Founders know how much your acceptance means to me. **PH**

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Find more information about OPRC at [oldpeoplesridingclub.org](http://oldpeoplesridingclub.org). To learn more about social phobia, go to the Web site [www.socialphobia.org/whatis.html](http://www.socialphobia.org/whatis.html).