I was surprised by a call from an acquaintance that took horseback riding lessons with me years ago. She was looking for volunteers to assist at Midland Children’s Rehab Center. Delighted, I accepted, thinking how much fun it would be to be around horses once again in my life. My volunteer work with disabled children, horses and physical therapists helped me learn to be more patient with myself and others. What began as an opportunity to complete my service hours, ended as a gift to myself from a special “sister.”

The hippotherapy program helps disabled children mounted on horses do exercises that teach them how to use different muscles of their bodies than what can be accomplished with traditional physical therapy programs. The effort the children have to exert is very demanding and hard for them to achieve, but they accomplish difficult, sometimes painful, movements/exercises with motivated and cheerful hearts. I fell in love with helping the children achieve their goals and seeing their smiles and hearing their laughter when a horse shook its mane or neighed.

One of my favorite memories happened the first day I volunteered. A child, obviously excited that she was going to ride a horse, walked as fast as she could with her walker, smiling and demanding to know where her horse was. While on the horse, the young girl turned toward me and asked my name. I told her my name; she then looked at me with her big brown eyes and repeated my name very slowly. After a while the child asked, “Are you my sista?” I smiled and
responded “No, I am not your sister.” Undaunted, she kept asking me “Are you my sista?” the rest of the day.

The next week, the young girl came with her mother and asked where I was. I came to her aid and she pointed to her mother’s stomach and said “my sista” along with my name. It was her wish she could have a sister named after me. Ever since then, whenever she asked if I was her “sista,” I always replied: “Yes, of course, I’m your sister.” I have volunteered for other service organizations and I enjoyed each experience. However, meeting and helping this little girl changed my attitude and I looked forward to each week because of the bond that formed between me and this special patient.

My volunteer work at the Midland Rehab Center taught me that patience is a key to life. I marvel at the enthusiasm, endurance and persistence displayed by children participating in the hippotherapy program. I gained a sister, a soul sister, even though we are different ages and ethnicity. I’ve always wanted a big family, and through her I learned a larger concept of the meaning of family, and that is what my volunteering experience has given me. “One’s sister is part of one’s essential self, an eternal presence of one’s heart, soul and memory.” –Susan Cabil