**Media release**

**Special equestrian conquers challenges to compete at highest level**

Equestrian rider Sarah Dalton personifies the spirit of the Special Olympics and will be chasing more medals at the Freemasons New Zealand National Summer Games in December.

Despite facing a multitude of physical and developmental challenges because of her CHARGE Syndrome, Sarah has proven to be unstoppable on horseback and outside the sporting arena.

“Special Olympics has given me confidence and a place where I truly belong,” says the Manukau athlete who experienced some terrible bullying in her younger years.

Sarah began horse riding 11 years ago and has never looked back. Aside from the social benefits, her sport acts as respiratory physiotherapy to improve her breathing, and in 2019 she was appointed as a Special Olympics Athlete Leader.

The 24-year-old’s zest for life is infectious and inspirational to everyone she comes across.

Her natural talent for social media even landed her a job at Special Olympics New Zealand and this year her outgoing personality also earned her a guest appearance on the Power Rangers Netflix series.

“In the episode I play coach Lily who helps the Green Power Ranger succeed in a big race and I teach her that winning isn’t everything and being kind is more important,” laughs Sarah.

Living with the rare CHARGE Syndrome has been extremely difficult for Sarah and her family, going through 32 surgeries, three resusitations and countless other scares as a result of associated heart and lung conditions.

“It affects all my senses and some of my organs. For me it affects my brain, my hearing, my eyes, my touch, my lungs, my heart, my throat and my balance. I think that’s all my problems,” explains Sarah matter-of-factly.

One of the most challenging element of Sarah’s condition in her chosen sport is the fact she carries out her dressage and working trails despite total loss of vision in her left eye and 30% of vision in her right eye.

To carry out her dressage routine, Sarah carefully walks and memorises the course by using the sentence “The Fat Black Mother Cat Had Eight Kittens” to remember what task needs to be done at each stop.

“I can’t see the poles but I’ve learned to ride with limited eyesight so I know how to get the horse to right places,” says Sarah.

To make things even tougher, Special Olympians do not compete on their own horse but competitors are given a new horse at each competition.

“You can turn one horse down, if it doesnt click, but that has not happened to me yet. I seem to bond pretty quickly with whatever horse I am given,” explains Sarah.

All these challenges are not holding her back, judging by the six medals Sarah claimed at her previous two appearances at the National Games, including a gold medal in dressage in 2013.

The Manukau athlete is excited to add to that collection in Hamilton, where nearly 2000 athletes will competes across 11 sports at 8 venues from December 8-12.

Whether she is successful or not, she is sure about one thing: “We always have so much fun, it’s a huge party.”

***For more information contact Special Olympics media manager Coen Lammers on 021-730239***