

YOUTH COLUMN



by
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Learning from the most unlikely places

I took up western riding lessons at a local barn when I turned eight and decided tutus and ballet slippers were not for me. I had every horse book, horse calendar, and stuffed horse I could get my hands on. If you had told me then, that I would be where I am today in my riding career, I wouldn't have believed you. While pouring over university and college pamphlets, I made the decision to do something that I really enjoyed. I wanted it to be something I looked forward to when I got up in the morning, something that even if I won the lottery and didn't have to work, I would do it anyway. I also wanted something that came easily to me and that I was passionate about, but it still challenged me. It was clear to me, that the only option that met all my criteria was working with horses.

Having adopted and trained my own horse from a rescue farm, for the past year, I recall having an instant bond with Tequila. I had been coaching, giving riding lessons and barn managing for almost two years prior to adopting Tequila. I leased a reining horse for several years and participated in several horse shows. My high school grades were good, and I was accepted into Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre (one of the premier equestrian schools in North America). I attended this school in West Virginia for one year. I went to school 12-16 hours per day, 5 or 6 days a week and I rode for 2-5 hours each day. I graduated at the top of my class, and on the President's List. I even managed to win some ribbons in the highly competitive school shows at the end of each semester. Upon graduation I returned to Canada where I was very fortunate to be referred to one of the top reining trainers in Ontario and was hired on as an apprentice. I rode 8-12 horses a day, starting work at 4am to beat the heat through the summer. I am currently working as an assistant to another top trainer in London Ontario. I

have a string of 2 and 3 year olds that I ride each day, and I am hopefully that they will be ready to show by spring-time.

There are many ongoing studies about how horses can help or heal people both emotionally and physically. About 3 years ago I was fortunate enough to have a similar opportunity. Becoming involved with the Make-A-Wish Foundation, I was assigned to a young, terminally-ill girl whose wish was to have a horse of her own. Tara Houston was 7 years old, and had been diagnosed with a brain tumour. While I am unsure of the specifics of her condition, I do know that Tara began to lose her balance and fine motor skills before her horse arrived. Neighbours and friends had erected a fenced-in area and a lean-to so Tara could have her very own horse in her backyard. I was asked to help teach the family how to handle the horse, tack up, basic safety measures, how much to feed him and I was to ride the horse to ensure he would be safe for the family. As "Buddy" stepped off the trailer, a small dark bay with mischief in his eyes, I thought "Oh no! There's no way this horse will be suitable for a young girl!" He was pushy, defiant about picking up his feet, and dragged one of the other volunteers as she was leading him to the pasture to introduce him to his new home. I couldn't help but think what an awful situation it would be for Tara to be hurt by her horse, especially in her fragile state. But, as many of us know or have heard, there

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MAKE-A-WISH.

is a unique bond between horses and children. Buddy changed from a tiger into a kitten when he was around Tara. Buddy would drop his head and follow Tara around. He didn't fuss, fight or flick an ear when Tara's mom let her ride bareback. Buddy would lay down and rest his head in Tara's lap as she read to him every day for as long as her body allowed her to get out of bed. His eyes changed from mischief and assertiveness to soft, calm, and gentle, and no one can really explain that.

I continued to go to the Houston's farm to school Buddy for them. When Tara could no longer ride, her mom continued to ride Buddy and occasionally that mischief would resurface and he would refuse to leave the property when she took him out to ride on the trails.

I wish that I could say Tara made a miraculous recovery and she is now a 10 year old who proudly rides her little bay horse across the lawn while her parents and brother look on. Tara and Buddy are both gone, strangely enough within days of one another. Buddy had been perfectly healthy until Tara left home for treatment.

The family is still involved with horses and there has been a children's foundation established in Tara's name and memory (www.taraboomhoustonchildrensfoundation.com).

The most poignant moment in my career with horses was not something that I won, or achieved through hard work. It was sharing that special time with the family of a little girl who loved horses. One who had all the same books, calendars and if possible, even more stuffed horses than I had. I'm thankful every day for my opportunity to volunteer with the Houston's, as they helped me discover my passion for horses on a different level. I look forward to going to work every day and if I win the lottery, I would ride, train, and coach for free. **I**