

## The Horse Whisperer

It is a beautiful Texas spring day; sunlight is coming down on the countryside, illuminating the green pastures and the surrounding trees on Jennifer's property. Pretty white fences crisscross each other to form lovely paddocks on each side of a winding drive-way to the house, the barn, and two riding arenas. As I pull up I see horses in several different areas and they seem happy to me, some actually look like they are skipping around. I park and walk up to the main house. Her husband, John, comes to the front door; he is slightly graying, yet fitter than most twenty year olds. He is wearing a bicycling outfit complete with spandex and shoes. It seems out of place in this rustic environment. The expensive shoes in particular are more appropriate for pedals and pavement rather than stirrups and dirt. But this is really not about John, rather it is about his wife Jennifer. Until recently, they lived in an exclusive neighborhood. They purchased this property for Jennifer's horse training business seven years ago. At that time, John swore he would never step foot on it. They decided to make the move because maintaining one house would be easier. John tells me Jennifer is in the barn.

I find her working with a student, preparing a beautiful, white and black, palomino horse to be ridden. Jennifer, like her husband, is very fit. She has short spiky hair and a welcoming smile. Something about her says she is well disciplined; it seems she could very easily be a physical fitness guru leading a high performance exercise class. But not today, today she will be training a rider.

Jennifer works with horses and their riders as a dressage trainer. Her student, a middle age woman, doesn't say a word but steps right into the routine as she gets her saddle from the saddle room and puts it on the horse. Jennifer, however, is eager to tell me all about what she does. She explains dressage is a "French word for training" and was "used by soldiers in battle to

protect themselves, they had defensive and offensive movements they used with their horse,” it is now the “highest discipline in horse riding and an Olympic sport.” She glides into an explanation of all the muscles that are used by the horse and the rider: “piano players have to learn how to use both hands at the same time; in dressage we use both of our hands, our thighs and legs, and even our posture at the same time. How we sit on the horse is very important. It’s very demanding on the horse’s body and the rider.” She says it’s “like a complicated dance for the rider because each body part is doing something different but all working together; and like weightlifting for the horse because of how they have to carry their back, neck and hind end.” I am starting to understand why she is so physically fit.

We walk from the barn to the covered arena. Jennifer attaches a line to the horse and holds it as a precaution then stands in the middle of the arena while the rider rides the horse in a circle around her. All the while the student is being corrected on her posture. “Pull your leg in”, “right hand higher”, “watch your back”. This student, I am told later, has started riding a little over a year ago, so she is still learning the basics.

When the lesson is over, the rider is responsible for putting the saddle away and brushing down the horse. Jennifer’s next student has not showed up so we have some time to talk. When asked what got her into horse riding, she says it was because of chronic pain and the need for therapy: “I was always interested in horses but was allergic to most animals, even horses, when I was younger. Then, when I started to look for ways to help with my chronic pain, I discovered I was no longer allergic to horses. I still have allergies to all the other animals though.” Then she leans in with wide eyes and says, “But isn’t that the way it is, doors just open for you when you need them to.” She explains that riders usually show a connection early on and then tells me a story about a mother that brought her three year old in for riding lessons because she was

showing an obsession with horses and “collected”. I ask what “collected” means, she explains that some people are born with a natural desire toward horses. They collect pictures or toys, anything to do with horses. Those are the ones that stick with lessons. When it is the parents’ idea, children don’t stick with it because the sport is too demanding.

According to Jennifer it takes many years of training to become good but even then you never stop training in dressage. She compares training horses to parenting, “you never stop learning, it can be a lifetime, and like kids some horses are gifted and some are not.” As she tells me story after story of her horses, I think that parenting is a good analogy to horse training for her because I can see the happiness and life lessons she has learned with her horses. Like her story of an Arabian horse.

“He was very ADD; I had to run him before lessons to calm him down. After six months I could tell he liked it and that the structure of training was good for him.” one day though she worried aloud to a fellow trainer that he was getting depressed, but was told, “no he is calming down.” She realized her friend was right and she could tell because he had a frothy mouth whenever he was ridden. “You can tell a horse is happy by the frothy mouth. When they’re ridden correctly, they will be comfortable with their bit and actually suck on it and play with it. That is what creates the froth.”

“Horse whisper is an appropriate term for what I do” she says. “Most people don’t realize that horses have their own personalities. You have to get to know them.” Getting to know them appears to be something she is good at. This is evident when she tells me, “Once I had a horse that was eager to please. He worked really hard and one day when I had him out for jumping, I realized he was anxious to do something big so I raised the bar twice as high and said ‘go jump

it' just like that, and he did it. He came back around and he was just so proud of himself." As she finishes the story, I can see her pride as well.

Driving away I realize I now understand why so many people use horses as therapy. It takes so much dedication, love, and respect to take care of horses and learn how to ride them that a person can't help but be distracted from any pain they might have. I also wonder if these horses realize how lucky they are to have Jennifer for their mom; I see the horses in the pastures and realize they really are happy.

#### Works Cited

Funk, Jennifer. Personal interview. 28 Apr. 2014.