



Life Lessons:

Horseback Riding at Challenge Ranch Builds Trust

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka, MSW

“When in doubt, ask a horse.” Kids lucky enough to come to Descanso’s Challenge Ranch know the wisdom of this simple advice. Awash in the inner storms of adolescence, many young riders have found a haven of calm on the hilly ten acres of Jane and Ron Tomczaks’ ranch. Under the Tomczaks’ tutelage, these kids have a great time building their skills in horseback riding and in life, one courageous step at a time.

A Determined Blitz

As I walked the grounds of Challenge Ranch the horses, 26 in all, surveyed me with gentle curiosity. The smell of sage and fresh-cut hay sets the scene; there is an air of purpose here. The Tomczaks have spent an industrious year clearing brush, chiseling trails, and building a riding arena suitable for various skill levels

Geraniums in bathtubs and barrels soften the rough-and-ready atmosphere. A Rim Trail encircles the edge of the property for half a mile with views to forever. Routes with jumps and obstacles for skill building beckon from various points along the Rim Trail.

The Tomczaks’ determined blitz to prepare the ranch for its young fans has been a labor of love. And it is ongoing. Gratefully, the Tomczaks have had lots of help. It seems that anyone who has been touched by the Tomczaks’ vision wants to help them bring the experience of horseback riding to more kids.

A Horse Can Be a Lifeline

Before relocating one year ago to its current location in the outer dirt-road reaches of East County, the Tomczaks were based in Blossom Valley. Some kids have been riding with them for six years. There are currently about 55 kids who ride at Challenge Ranch, 30 of whom participate free of charge. The children who participate free of charge are referred to the Tomczaks by social service agencies or word of mouth; they are kids in rocky circumstances for whom the unconditional love of a horse can be a lifeline.

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One might think that there could be an awkward split between the kids who pay for lessons and those who don't. The reality is, the kids find ways to mentor each other and pull their own weight in different ways. The Tomczaks set a tone of mutual respect and light-hearted, ranch-style fun. With their intuitive style, which blends you-can-do-it challenge and compassion, they succeed in lassoing kids from wildly different backgrounds into a cohesive stampede of motivation.

Jane Tomczak was born and raised in England, and knows the ache of a painful childhood first-hand. She has no doubt that her connection with her horse helped guide her around dark corners and harness positive energy despite family troubles and an adolescent world spinning too fast. Grateful for the solace and sense of purpose she'd found in horseback riding, Jane realized she could do the same for other children.

Growing Up Together

KC Conner, 16, started at the Ranch four years ago. In the midst of a difficult family situation, afternoons at Challenge Ranch have given K.C. a fresh start. While learning to ride, K.C.'s confidence blossomed. "I made good friendships; it's like we grew up together [at the ranch]." K.C. has participated in a number of horse shows and also enjoys Challenge Ranch's 15-mile endurance rides.

Accomplishing Something Big

Patrick Seveland, 17, was failing school a year ago, struggling with depression and troubled by family issues when K.C. introduced him to the Tomczaks. Shortly after, Patrick began spending time at the Ranch. He offered to care for General Rommel, a large Chestnut Gelding. "I've come here and matured; I've had to take care of an animal, a living, breathing thing; it's helped me get my stuff together," he says.

Like K.C., Patrick enjoys participating in shows and is now a skilled rider. "The best thing is succeeding. I can say I'm going to get better at Texas Barrels for an upcoming show and then I can go to the show and actually place. It feels like I've accomplished something so big; it makes me feel really good inside."

Patrick is now earning As, Bs and Cs at school instead of straight Fs. He attributes his new motivation directly to his experience at Challenge Ranch. "I used to keep to myself and I was really quiet. When I started at the ranch everyone here was so friendly and talkative that I couldn't help opening up to them."

Sharing Vulnerability and Success

Lots of kids come to Challenge Ranch simply because it's earned a reputation for being a great place to learn to ride. The ranch is about so much more than horses. There is a genuine camaraderie among the kids; they watch each other care for the horses and share vulnerability and success as they try new things.

Proud to Shine

Aubrey Bailey, 8, from Alpine, began taking horseback riding lessons at Challenge Ranch two years ago. She loved the lessons so much that her parents decided to lease a horse at the ranch.

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“You learn a lot about horses and you can ask so many questions about grooming, tacking them up, and how to make sure they’re taken care of. I learned how they grow into really big horses from tiny ones,” says Aubrey. She also participates in the shows; she loves watching everyone else and feels proud to shine in front of her mom and dad.

An Enthusiastic and Patient Mentor

Catharine Marckwardt, 16, lives in the College area and has been riding at Challenge Ranch for six years. According to Jane Tomczak, Catharine is an enthusiastic and patient mentor to the younger kids and has been able to use some of her experience to fulfill her high school community service credits.

Catharine loves the social aspect of the ranch, especially during summertime when kids have more time off from school. “We go out on trails and ride for two hours; we explore and see if we can find new places to go. I have always been very shy and horses really opened up my social life. You make friends with the horses and they don’t say anything judgmental to you. Now I’m more able to communicate with other people,” she says.

I asked Catharine how a connection with a horse is different from a dog or cat. “Horses are sophisticated, beautiful and magnificent,” she says. “When you’re riding a horse there’s an unspoken bond between the horse and the rider and it’s wonderful.”

The Courage to Trust

It takes courage to develop trust, the most basic and heart-opening process involved in learning to ride a horse. Trust is an essential component in friendship, indeed in any relationship. It also takes courage to trust ourselves, to have faith that we can rise to life’s challenges.

Patrick sums it up: “It feels so great to set a goal and be able to accomplish it. It makes me feel like I have something to look forward to.”

K.C. adds, “Horses will always be there for you. They listen to you and they love you. And Jane and Ron open their hearts to everyone; they are so welcoming. They are like second parents.”

Challenge Ranch lives up to its name, challenging youths to find, or keep, what so often gets lost along the way: trust in themselves.

Find Out More

Log on to the Challenge Ranch web site at www.challengeranch.org or contact Jane or Ron Tomczak directly at 619-445-0598. Challenge Ranch is located at 5973 Stallion Oaks Road, El Cajon, CA 92019. Donations are tax-deductible.

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