

Longears Teach Kids About Life

By Helen T. Hertz

It's no secret that children who spend time caring for and working with animals have a leg up when it comes to becoming responsible adults. But time spent with longears seems to have an added benefit. Whether kids are actually out in the field or arena with their mules and donkeys or just learning about them through an entertaining program like Meredith Hodges's new DVD "Jasper Goes To Bishop," they're on a path to discovery – discovering what makes these equines so unique and special and discovering some things about themselves.

Betsy Hutchins knows firsthand what the company of donkeys can do for kids. Co-founder of the American Donkey and Mule Society with her husband Paul, the Denton, Texas, resident raised her four children around donkeys and can attest that they (the kids and the donkeys) turned out great.

"Everyone knew we had donkeys, and I worried the kids would get teased at school," Hutchins says, "But they never did. They were just set apart. I think being associated with donkeys made them more special. Other kids loved to come over and see the animals. Even strangers would come over with carrots to feed them."

As for the kids, Hutchins says the lessons they learned working with longears have served them their whole lives.

"All their time with the donkeys built great character," she says. "With a donkey you have to learn to be patient, you have to learn cooperation and you have to be willing to be humiliated, because they're not always going to do what you want them to."

Betsy says her youngest son was a real handful – one who would probably be diagnosed ADHD today – but working with a donkey centered him and gave him a goal.

"We had our donkeys to love more than to ride," she says, "but we saw their potential, and the kids learned to ride them without fear.

Betsy says there weren't any donkey shows in the area until her kids started them, earning respect for the animals and enjoying the challenge along the way.

Betsy and her husband Paul recall that the family took their donkeys everywhere—parades, shows, grocery store openings. They went wherever they were welcome, and the kids learned to deal with the animals in different situations.

"During one parade it was hotter than hinges," Paul recalls. "Our son was riding our donkey Platero and at one point, Platero just folded his legs underneath himself and laid down in the street. People laughed but our boy just stayed on him and after a bit, Platero got back up and continued on."

That's the lesson with these animals, Paul reminds us. A mule or donkey works *with* you not *for* you. And that's a good one to learn.

Many kids who might not otherwise ever have the opportunity to meet a mule or donkey are getting that chance through therapeutic riding programs around the country. Hearts and Horses Therapeutic Riding Center in Loveland, Colorado, has a few mules in its stable now, and longears trainer and advocate Meredith Hodges, an avid supporter of the center, has contributed her training series and personal training time to ensure their successful integration into the program.

“These animals really have a way with kids,” she says. “If you take proper care of them, they’ll take care of you, and to see that connection between a child and a mule or donkey is priceless.”

Paul agrees. “We’ve got to do more to get the kids involved with these animals,” he says. “I’ve seen it myself: when kids connect with mules and donkeys their eyes light up like the sun.”

Paul believes Meredith’s *Jasper the Mule* children’s series serves as an ideal introduction to the mule and donkey world and appeals to younger people in a way that holds their attention.

“Meredith should be commended for taking on a project that might not have done what she intended,” he says. “Where she might have ended up with another ‘SpongeBob SquarePants,’ she succeeded in creating an entertaining and educational program that shows what these animals can do and how they relate to other animals and their handlers.”

Meredith, herself, views her children’s books and DVDs as a gateway of sorts to a world that has given her so much.

“I love having kids out to the ranch and seeing their excitement, and I hope this character I’ve created generates that same kind of interest,” she says. “Kids are our future and getting them around mules and donkeys not only does a great deal for their development, it helps secure the longears’ future as well.”

For more information about Meredith Hodges and Jasper the Mule, please visit www.JasperTheMule.com and www.LuckyThreeranch.com or call 800-816-7566. For more information about the American Donkey and Mule Society, please visit www.lovelongears.com.