

Jasper the Mule On the Move

Meredith Hodges brings “Jasper: The Story of a Mule” to RFD-TV and Bishop Mule Days

by Helen Taylor Hertz

By now, many of you know Jasper, the lovable young mule who romps through Meredith Hodges’s children’s books, “Jasper: the story of a Mule” and “Jasper: a Christmas Caper.” But whether he’s by now a family friend or still new to you, you’ll have plenty of opportunity to spend time with him in the next few months. Created by Meredith and illustrated by Tennessee mule artist Bonnie Shields, Jasper is now the star of a Telly Award-winning animated video airing on RFD-TV, and Jasper, himself, will have the honor of serving as Grand Marshal at the Mule Days Celebration Parade in Bishop, Calif.

After nearly 30 years spent breeding, training, showing and promoting mules and donkeys, Meredith Hodges has found the ideal way to take her message on mules to kids. Her books have captured young imaginations everywhere, and her new animated video brings the story of Jasper to life. “Jasper: The Story of a Mule,” will air on the popular RFD-TV network through June (check local listings). The project was more than a year in the making, and Meredith corralled some amazing talent to get it done. Narrated by TV and film star Lee Horsley and animated by “Peanuts” animator Bill Melendez, with Bonnie’s careful direction, “Jasper” also features the music of Grammy-winning cowboy band Riders in the Sky and Mindy Ellis. In an era when parents find it increasingly difficult to find appropriate television programming for children, “Jasper” offers a welcome alternative with its powerful message of love and understanding.

Following on the heels of the RFD-TV premiere, comes the “Jasper” DVD. Available in June through www.jasperthemule.com, the special edition DVD will offer plenty of extras, including the making-of documentary, a blooper reel, and training shots with Meredith’s own Lucky Three Ranch mules. In addition, Meredith plans to release a “Jasper” CD featuring music from the show and other foot-tappin’ tunes.

A Grand Celebration

As any mule fan knows, Bishop Mule Days is the place to be on Memorial Day weekend. Over the course of a few action-packed days, upwards of 30,000 people will gather to watch more than 700 mules compete in 169 events. The Bishop Mule Days Parade on Saturday, May 28, is longest running, non-motorized parade in the country, and leading the way will be none other than Jasper, parade Grand Marshal.

Meredith, a long time Mule Days supporter and participant, will also be on hand for the event. She and Bonnie Shields will be at Bonnie’s booth through the weekend, and “Jasper” books and other products will be available for purchase through the week.

A Legacy of Dedication

Meredith continues to move at a mind-boggling pace, but even with such a full plate, she keeps her focus and her mission clear. No one has done more to elevate the stature of mules and donkeys and teach people how to properly care for and train them.

Since the publication of her first book, “Training Mules and Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Longears,” Meredith has written five more, including her latest “A Guide To Raising and Showing Mules,” an ideal resource for the 4-H project and beginners. Ten

training videos and 32 half-hour television shows serve as the foundation for Meredith's unique mule and donkey-training correspondence program, and customers know she's only a phone call or e-mail away with answers to their training questions.

As Meredith says, "If these people are going to take the time to train their animals the right way, the least I can do is make myself available to help them."

For years Meredith's father, "Peanuts" cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, encouraged her to write a children's book on her favorite subject. In 2003 she heeded Dad's advice, and now, with two "Jasper" books under her belt and more in the works, Meredith is reaching a larger audience than ever before.

"The best thing I can do for mules and donkeys is to introduce them to children in a positive way. If I can reach the kids early, before they buy into the stereotypes and prejudiced misconceptions, then maybe I can help them appreciate the special gifts of these, and all, animals."

Wise words from a woman who continues to find creative ways to shine a light on mules and donkeys. For more information about Meredith Hodges and "Jasper the Mule," visit www.LuckyThreeRanch.com or www.jasperthemule.com, or call (800) 816-7567.