

“Jasper: the Story of a Mule,” Premieres on RFD-TV... And That’s Just the Beginning
by Helen T. Hertz

Have you seen it? “Jasper: The Story of a Mule,” is on the air. The animated children’s program will run on RFD-TV through July (check listings), and Jasper fans everywhere will be happy to hear that the program is now available on DVD. You’ll find information about the DVD and a partner CD featuring music from the show at www.jasperthemule.com or www.luckythreeranch.com.

“Jasper” creator and mule and donkey expert Meredith Hodges says she couldn’t have found a better home for “Jasper” than RFD-TV.

“We’ve had such a great response since we started showing my training programs on the network four years ago,” she says. “We’ve found an enthusiastic audience, and that’s why I wanted to introduce ‘Jasper’ here.”

For nearly three decades, Meredith has dedicated herself to training, showing and promoting mules and donkeys. Her step-by-step training technique has helped revolutionize the way people work with longears. But more than that, Meredith has been instrumental in the effort to break down longstanding barriers and move mules into the horse world to compete in elite events such as dressage and show jumping. Throughout her career, Meredith has always challenged the status quo and looked for new ways to promote her favorite animals. Her books, videos and television programs serve a population eager to learn more about their mules and donkeys, and now, with “Jasper,” she has the opportunity to reach out to a younger audience.

The story of “Jasper” began with a letter Meredith wrote to herself from a young mule colt abused and confused by his human owners. It was a clever approach to training from a mule’s perspective, but just like “Jasper,” it had the potential to be more. At the urging of her father, “Peanuts” cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, Meredith eventually expanded the piece into a children’s book. Jasper: the Story of a Mule, follows the young mule as he is taken from his mother and his close friends, Kylie and Moxie, to a new home where he must find his place among strangers. It’s tough going at first. Little Jasper gets into trouble at every turn, despite his earnest efforts to please his new master. Gradually, though, he finds his place and all seems well, until he is faced with the greatest challenge of his young life and only his courage and heroism can save the day.

Meredith’s good friend Bonnie Shields was an easy choice to illustrate the book. The two women met about 20 years ago at the Mule Days Celebration in Bishop, Calif., where Meredith became an instant fan of Bonnie’s art. Over the years Bonnie has provided illustrations for Meredith’s training books and videos, and Meredith has continued to add Bonnie’s art to her own growing collection of longears-inspired works.

“Bonnie captures the soul of the mule,” Meredith says. “Like someone who paints portraits, she looks inside and sees who they really are.”

Even as she was writing “Jasper,” Meredith knew that she wanted to produce an animated telling of the story as well. For help, she turned to long-time collaborator MediaTech Productions in Fort Collins, Colo. The finished product, a half-hour program in 2-D animation, features an amazing array of talent. “Peanuts” animator Bill Melendez worked with Bonnie Shields’s storyboards to bring Jasper to life. Actor Lee Horsley narrates the story, and the musical score is performed by Grammy-winning cowboy band Riders in the Sky and newcomer Mindy Ellis.

“We created this video in the tradition of my father’s work,” Meredith says. “The 2-D animation style is ideally suited to the classic nature of the story. And these days, when it’s so difficult to find wholesome programming for children, we’re pleased to be able to present something with a positive message that’s also entertaining.”

She has reason to be proud, “Jasper: The Story of a Mule,” recently won the coveted Silver Telly Award, and the “Jasper” making-of documentary, “A Labor of Love,” which aired on RFD-TV through the winter, won a Bronze Telly Award.

The “Jasper” DVD, now available through Meredith’s website, includes the making-of documentary as well as a blooper reel and footage of Meredith’s own mules filmed at her Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colo. The CD, “Jasper and his Friends Present Riders in the Sky and Mindy Ellis,” includes the show’s theme song, “Anywhere on This Earth,” sung by Ellis, and several other great tunes by these talented musicians.

On Aug. 11, Meredith will host a concert starring Riders in the Sky and Mindy Ellis, at the Ellis Ranch in Loveland, Colo. The event is part of Jasper Celebration Day, a fun-filled extravaganza to acknowledge everyone who made “Jasper” possible. And a portion of the concert proceeds will go to support Hearts & Horses, a local organization dedicated to helping the disabled through therapeutic experiences with equines.

Meredith has always considered education to be her overriding mission, and she intends to continue to reach out to kids with more “Jasper” stories. She recently published the second book in the series, Jasper: A Christmas Caper, and more holiday-themed books are planned, including Jasper: A Precious Valentine, due out before Christmas, and Jasper: A Fabulous Fourth, coming in Spring 2006. Of course all will feature Bonnie Shileds’s charming art.

For more information about “Jasper: the Story of a Mule,” the DVD, the CD, and the Jasper Celebration Day concert, visit www.jasperthemule.com, www.luckythreeranch.com, or call 800-816-7566. And tune in the “Jasper” on RFD-TV!