

MEREDITH HODGES – BUILDING THE HEARTS & HORSES THERAPEUTIC RIDING CENTER MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

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Mule Talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream Production

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Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

The mules are in the corral. Welcome to Mule Talk. And I'm Cindy K. Roberts, your host. And our author, TV personality and world-renowned mule trainer, Meredith Hodges of the Lucky Three Ranch. I saw that you're building a new arena for Therapeutic Riding.

Meredith Hodges:

In 1976, I was a Psychiatric Technician at Sonoma and Napa State Hospitals in Northern California. This is where I learned Behavior Modification techniques that I would later use in my mule and donkey training. While I was working at these

two hospitals over a span of four years, I worked with numerous residents with a variety of disabilities. When you work with people who are severely handicapped, you begin to realize how difficult the everyday tasks that we take for granted are for someone who is compromised to such a great extent. I worked mostly as a Behaviorist, but often engaged in physical therapies with Occupational and Physical Therapists.

The people were confined to a hospital and had no hope of ever being able to visit a facility like the Hearts & Horses Therapeutic Riding Center in Loveland, Colorado. The most they could hope for was a jaunt around the grounds in a wheelchair. Most were simply bedridden and could expect no more than a few basic comforts and regular medical maintenance. It was then that I realized that they needed more than just my physical presence and nursing abilities to put some joy to their lives.

They all needed some degree of communication with me to be able to experience joy and not sink into the depths of despair, so I worked each day with each resident trying to initiate that smile for the day in addition to my regular duties. My efforts were rewarded time and time again.

Behavior Modification is an ongoing, careful balance of communication between living creatures. It works when both parties opt to listen and learn from each other. At each stage, there are tasks to perform that need to be balanced and refined by both the trainer and the trainee. Behavior Modification is not controlling. Rather, it's a Guidance System by which Positive Behaviors are rewarded and thus, more likely to be repeated and become Habitual. The parties involved are both rewarded each time they are together. They learn more about each other in an enjoyable and appreciative manner. This is what the learning process should be for both the clients and animals at Hearts and Horses.

I came to Colorado and began working at Hearts and Horse Therapeutic Riding Center when it was a very small group housed on an old 27-acre ranch. Gradually, we increased the capacity of our services. It began with a small indoor arena and wooden stalls that grew with corporate donations. The number of stalls were increased as was the size of the indoor arena. Another canvas arena was donated, but after a few years, it began to deteriorate. When the doors were blown off by a severe windstorm, we decided that it was finally time to construct a brand new solid state indoor arena. What we had in mind would cost about two million dollars. We had a contractor on the Board of Directors, but no way to cover that kind of cost. I donated \$350,000.00 to get us started and the fundraiser snowballed. It didn't take very long before we figured we would be able to double the size of the arena and add a lot of amenities.

We started that project in November of 2015 and it's been finished, growing by leaps and bounds. It is absolutely phenomenal. It's actually the size of two full-sized arenas so we can run multiple classes at once. We can even separate it into three small arenas and run up to three different classes at the same time. We have classrooms, offices and facilities for the horses: a tack and groom area and a tack room. We have a room for all of the rider equipment like helmets, extra boots and even a kitchen right off the Guest and Employee Lounges. It's a truly beautiful facility. Donors see it and know that their money is being well-spent!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

So this is set up for people and children with physical disabilities?

Meredith Hodges:

I started working with Hearts & Horses 26 years ago. It's five miles west of my Lucky Three Ranch. They have 27 acres. When I first started, it was a small farm that was donated by a friend that used to raise Morgans. We spent the last 23 years building it up a little at a time. We began with strictly Disabled riders and eventually expanded the facility and programs.

Now, we not only deal with Disabled riders, but also Wounded Warriors, Veterans, At-Risk kids, people with Alzheimer's (Ride in the Moment). We have a Summer Camp where kids can learn how to manage and train horses. We just recently added a retreat for First Responders and many classes for those who would like to do Continuing Education. We do a yearly fundraiser Gala that is very profitable for the organization. In 2025, we raised over \$800,000.00! You can see a lot of what we do, donate and get to know our diverse herd at www.heartsandhorses.org

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow. That is so cool. So what does it take to make this program successful? I mean, there's a lot going on behind the scenes.

Meredith Hodges:

•***Therapeutic Riding Benefits***

- 1) Promotes Strength
- 2) Increases Flexibility
- 3) Develops Balance
- 4) Improves Coordination
- 5) Helps Breathing
- 6) Improves Coping Skills

•***Therapy Services Benefits***

- 1) Increases range of motion
- 2) Decreases hypertonicity
- 3) Increases head and trunk control
- 4) Improves motor planning
- 5) Improves sensory processing
- 6) Improves joint mobility
- 7) Improves posture and symmetry
- 8) Improves gait
- 9) Improves fine and gross motor skills
- 10) Improves muscle strength
- 11) Improves balance
- 12) Improves coordination
- 13) Builds Self-Confidence
- 14) Improves Social Skills

•***We are able to work with a wide range of Disabilities. Common diagnoses include (but are not limited to):***

- 1) Muscular Dystrophy
- 2) ADD/ADHD
- 3) Multiple Sclerosis
- 4) Visual Impairment
- 5) Down Syndrome
- 6) Spina Bifida
- 7) Emotional Disorders

- 8) Spinal Cord Injuries
- 9) Learning Disabilities
- 10) Autism Spectrum Disorders
- 11) Cerebral Palsy
- 12) Sensory Integration
- 13) Developmental Delay
- 14) Fine/Gross Motor Skills
- 15) Traumatic Brain Injuries

•The ***Changing Leads*** program is designed to help *Youth At-Risk* find friendship, develop trust and form a deep connection through partnering with a horse. The program focuses on teaching transferable skills to enhance personal, school, family, and community relationships through Equine-Assisted Learning and Social-Emotional Learning.

Our ***Changing Leads*** classes typically take place in a group setting, and are taught by a *PATH Intl. Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor*. We offer Changing Leads classes to individuals as well as schools and other organizations.

Ages: 5 – 18 years

•***Equine-Assisted Learning Can Assist in the Development of:***

- Trust
- Respect
- Empathy
- Self-respect and confidence
- Accountability
- Conflict resolution
- Relationship Building

•***Equine-Assisted Learning Can Address Issues Including:***

- Depression
- Trauma
- Anger management
- Substance abuse
- Domestic violence
- Attachment disorders
- Grief and loss
- Anxiety

***Riding In The Moment:** This program is designed to enhance the quality of life for individuals with *Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia*, and other forms of memory loss. We currently partner with long-term care facilities in Northern Colorado who bring clients to us weekly during the summer and fall. We also take individual participants. Some participants enjoy riding, while others engage in ground work with the horses, such as grooming.

•Benefits of Riding in the Moment™:

- 1) Enhance levels of engagements, both at the ranch and at the care facility
- 2) Helps to facilitate positive experiences, reliving memories and connecting with the natural world
- 3) Demonstrates the power of the human-animal bond
- 4) Encourages physical and cognitive strengthening activities

•HEARTS & HORSES FOR HEROES

Veterans Program: Hearts & Horses for Heroes is an equine-assisted therapeutic horsemanship program designed specifically for Veterans of every era. Our vision for the Hearts and Horses for Heroes Program is to help Veterans heal and grow by restoring the wisdom of their mind, body and spirit through their interactions with horses, each other, and the natural world.

We do not charge our Veterans to participate in our Hearts & Horses for Heroes program since they have already given so much. We do rely on the generosity of the community to underwrite 100% of this program through sponsorship.

•Benefits of Hearts & Horses for Heroes:

- Builds confidence
- Improves coping skills
- Decreases isolation
- Teaches assertiveness
- Emotional growth and healing
- Builds trust
- Increases self control
- Teaches non-verbal communication skills
- Improves social skills

We have fantastic Volunteers and Paid Staffers that have been there as long as I have. We serve over 800 clients and have about 270 volunteers that come to Hearts and Horses to do all kinds of different things from Office work to Ranch work. We have a Tack Shop because a lot of times people will donate things that we can't necessarily use. We don't try to operate with those donations. We have a specific feeding program and specific tack and equipment that we *need* to use. So we sell the donations through our Tack Shop to pay for the feed, tack & equipment that we *do* need to use to make the facility as safe as it can be. This method of operation keeps the horses healthy and provides the riders with the right kinds of English and Western tack and equipment that they can use. Since the animals are being led by Volunteers and supported with Side Walkers, we use a lot of bitless bridles. We do put reins in the hands of the riders. Professional Therapists come in at scheduled times to see their clients.

The people at Hearts and Horses are completely and totally dedicated to what they do. Because it is so well organized and because we're using the right equipment, feeding the animals correctly and training the animals correctly, we're making things work the right way. People really enjoy coming out there and volunteering because all the relationships among animals and people are mutually satisfying. It attracts visitors because the grounds and buildings are so well-kept by our Staffers, Crews, Gardening and Landscaping volunteers. Volunteers like interacting with the equines and cleaning the facility. Donors see that their money is being well spent. That has made a world of difference.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

We're members of PATH International (Professional Association for Therapeutic Horsemanship) and we've been national winning awards for the last five years with our Volunteers and our Equines. We even had one of our mules win *Horse of the Year*. My training program is unique in its focus on the equine's Balanced Postural Core Strength Physical Development. It is commonly known that riding equine's is good for Physical Therapy and Mental Well-Being. What people don't realize that it isn't just the riding on any equine that is Therapeutic and beneficial to the rider. The movement of the equine does cause motion in the rider that will help to align the spine and positively affect the rider's posture.

As I have told the staff at Hearts and Horses, the positive effect of the equine's movement is proportional to the equine's own Postural Balance and Development. This means that the core elements that support the equine's skeleton need to be developed in a logical, sequential symmetrical way that will result in Perfect Balance.

When this is done correctly, the muscles, tendons, ligaments, soft tissue and cartilage that support the bones will functionally act as they were designed to do according to the *Laws of Physics*. Joints will bend and flex correctly allowing the cartilage to wear evenly to prevent the onset of Arthritis and other problems. The legs can remain aligned with movement straight and true. All internal organs are properly aligned and allowed to function efficiently.

The more Perfect Balance and Core Support that the equine has to offer, the more he can transfer Correct Balance and Strength to the rider. This kind of Postural Core Strength Training can only be done using my *Elbow Pull Training Aid* at the walk on the Lead Rope through the Hourglass Pattern. I made sure that all my books and videos are made available to everyone in the Hearts and Horses Library.

The tasks in the pattern **MUST** be done repetitively, consistently and routinely the same way all the time to really have any permanent influence on the equine's Habitual Way of Moving. Making sure that the equines we use in the Hearts and Horse programs are trained, and Core Strength is developed correctly, ensures the success in all of our equine's interaction with the clients. Caring and being of service to both the equines and the clients fosters deep and abiding relationships that help to achieve a level of intimacy and mutual respect that you never knew could exist. Our clients receive the best possible therapy from the Hearts and Horses herd. For more information, go to my website at www.luckythreeranch.com and look under **TRAINING/TRAINING TIPS #11, #25, #36. #42** and under **TRAINING/MULE CROSSING/USE OF THE ELBOW PULL IN THE HOURGLASS PATTERN.**

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, great.

Meredith Hodges:

I have donated three mules to Hearts and Horses so far: *Sadie*, *Brandy* and *Allie*. They had *Katie* already when I first started working there. Even the miniature donkeys and mules have tremendous Therapeutic Value. They recently obtained two miniature donkeys that also work there and travel to locations in the community. *Levi* and *Paco* are very popular! In fact, all the equines have their specific fans at Hearts and Horses as is demonstrated with our *Valenquine Fundraiser* in February. When you are extremely selective about the equines that you use for Therapeutic Riding, you will get the best results in your programs. Contrary to popular belief, you don't want to use *deadheads*, *old* or rejected animals. They probably have the worst possible posture, rough gaits and a difficult attitude. They are candidates for intense therapy themselves.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, that's great.

Meredith:

It's truly amazing how horses, mules and donkeys give so much to people to heal them in so many ways. It's a miraculous facility with amazing programs! We have spent, 26 years putting this together by doing the right kinds of things to make it the place that it is today. And now, we are challenging ourselves to move forward and do even more. The Longears that retire will come to the Lucky Three Ranch to live out the rest of their lives. We also make sure that Hearts and Horses continues to receive more Longears to replace their retirees. When the mules and donkeys came on board, things began rapidly changing for the better. ***We are a family of inspired, highly motivated and creative people!***

Longears bring out the best in people that are open to them. One of my very favorite people at Hearts and Horses was one of our Award-Winning riders named Cliff Uber. As a paraplegic, he began riding *Sadie*, one of the mules that I donated. He had to walk with crutches strapped to both arms, had a lot of difficulty just mounting and rode with side walkers on both sides in the beginning. But he always persisted when faced with challenges! He never gave up trying to do everything that he could. I admired his perseverance and positive attitude about *everything*. Over the years, I saw his riding ability improve so drastically that he eventually moved into jumping. At that point I suggested that perhaps he become one of our instructors! He gladly welcomed the challenge!

He taught me how important it was to think outside of the box and focus on learning about the people I was working with rather than thinking about what I could teach them. *Cliff* taught me how important it was to realize that I had things I could learn from *everyone*. I realized how important Face to Face Communication could be for all people. We have all been so programmed to think Computers and Smart Phones are a superior way to communicate. I found the opposite to be true. I realized the computer was only a tool. ***It was more important to listen and converse with people if you want the best results, solutions to any issues and the opportunity to develop deeper and abiding relationships.***

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh my goodness. Yes.

Meredith Hodges:

Having mules and donkeys in the programs accelerated the speed of getting sponsors and donors and upgrading the facility. They do things that really help in a really short period of time. People were just falling in love with them. Everybody has their favorite special donkey or mule. It's really funny. (laughs)

There is a lot to think about when building a good relationship with your equine. The MOST IMPORTANT thing of all is to focus on making communication with your equine clear, concise and consistent. Deliver your intentions with a thoughtful and respectful attitude. We have a really happy program going on at Hearts and Horses and people love to be there. We are helping so many people, including ourselves!

Have you heard of Amberley Snyder? She used to do rodeo and got in a wreck with her truck and trailer. She wound up paralyzed and in a wheelchair, but what an *amazing inspiration* she has turned out to be! Nothing kept her down and she is back to riding again and giving speeches about her experience to a lot of different groups. A couple years ago, she actually came out to one of our fundraisers and spoke. She inspired our riders even more. We have everyone from really young riders, like five-year-olds all the way to 95 years old. We even had one rider that was a hundred years old and what an amazing character he was!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, wow.

Meredith:

Always give both people and animals your undivided attention so you are able to LISTEN to what they are trying to tell you about your own communication skills. Be willing to *LISTEN* and *LEARN* from them. You will *greatly* increase exposure to *safety* and *decrease the risk of injury* and often death. *NEVER* take electronic devices with you when interacting with your *friends*, people and equines! The distraction of Electronic Devices can only block the lines of communication and put you both at risk! There are truly no viable benefits that they can offer! You should *never ride alone* when Trail Riding which is just one of many Riding Rules we abided by before there were electronic devices. And, if you are out Trail Riding, chances are you won't even get service for your electronic device anyway. ***It is MUCH MORE IMPORTANT to keep the lines of Communication open between you, your clients and your equine!*** You open your heart to a lot more than happiness. You will experience true *JOY* and give that blessed gift to others each and every day!

Meredith Hodges:

At the Lucky Three Ranch, we complement the work that they do at Hearts and Horses with our TOURS. Many people that come for our tours are young kids and older people from the Assisted Living Facilities in our area. It does keep us busy and it does keep up the morale. The best thing about this kind of work is that the people enjoy it so much. You just need to remember to be of service and not think about anything else. Do not focus on what you can get out of any situation or how much money you can obtain for your services. Share the blessings that God gave you *freely* with others. ***Give and share what you have with others and good will naturally follow from your unselfish attitude.***

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, wow.

When we had Covid-19 running rampant for a year, it just broke my heart to know that that our Assisted Living Tourists were contained for so long. When they came for the tours, at the beginning we would show a movie about how this place evolved and what I do. When they first got here, they would seem down and depressed with mad looks on their faces. After the movie, I would come before them and do a mini clinic. I talked all about my training program and the value of Balanced Postural Core Strength Training. Most of the questions I would get were, "*Well, that sounds like it would work on people, too!?*"

I would say, "*Yes, it does.*"

Then they would say, "*Oh, but when my physical therapist explains it, there is so much to remember and my memory isn't that good.*"

And I'd say, "*Oh, no, it really doesn't have to be that hard. All you need to do is to point your toes in the direction of travel, look where you are going and the rest of your body will fall into place!*"

They would get so excited and say, "*Oh, that's really cool.*"

Then you see BIG smiles wash over the people's faces and I say, "*Okay, now we've done this for half an hour. Now we're going to go out and see mules and statues!*"

The people in the wheelchairs would hustle out the door and have wheelchair races in the driveway! We have tour carts, so we can drive people around who are on oxygen. One of my staff is a really tall, handsome long-haired blonde *Fabio*-looking guy. The little old ladies always fought with each other to see who got to sit next to *Fabio* in the cart.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

My illustrator, *Bonnie Shields* even did a cartoon painting about it. In the painting, the ladies are running after each other, hitting each other with canes while the mules are smiling. Longears have a wonderful sense of humor! The ladies are falling all over each other trying to get to *Fabio*! The ladies just go wild when they get out here and the visiting men just get big wide grins! ***Laughter and good humor is always great therapy!***

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, wow. (laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

It's so much fun that they don't ever want to leave when it's time to go. Many are repeat visitors and always look forward to coming to see us again. They say the TOURS at the Lucky Three Ranch are the *Community's Best Kept Secret!*

It always puts everyone in such a great mood. And, we've been able to handle up to 75 people at once. Interacting with horses, and mules especially, is incredibly positive therapy! Whether at Hearts and Horses or the Lucky Three Ranch, our contributions to the community are priceless! To see a lot more, go to my website at www.luckythreeranch.com and view the numerous Therapeutic Riding videos that we have posted under *RESOURCES/THERAPEUTIC RIDING*

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

We've had *Mystery Tours* that come in here from Missouri, on their big buses. We can fit 75 chairs in the Tack Barn where we show the movie. I tell people, we'll take everybody from one to 75 people and we do it. These tours are booked ahead of time and the people never know the destinations. We never did disappoint anyone!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, my. Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

People do enjoy tours, but they often say, "*Why don't you go on the road and do clinics?*" And I reply, "*If I went on the road to do clinics, I wouldn't be able to communicate with as many people as I can through the Tours, my website and through my books and videos.*" We give people all the information they could want for FREE on my website! Then they can decide if they want to purchase the books and videos from our website STORE.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

When people bring their own animals to a clinic, it is costly and it does not always inspire true learning. One time we did an assessment of 15 people that were here for a *Richard Shrake Clinic* with horses. I couldn't pass any of the horses past Stage One, Leading Training.

Their horses were not strong enough to do any more than that without compromising their bodies. The people attend clinics to *ride* and *socialize* and are not keen about doing leading exercises. If you try to educate them about Postural Core Strength, they don't know what that means and will tell you their equines are big and strong enough to be ridden. They simply are not aware of the difference between Bulk Muscle and Postural Core Strength.

If people want to get the benefit of Postural Core Strength Training, I decided that I could give a Mini Clinic introduction when they come here on a Tour without their equines. I can explain the program in detail so they understand how it evolves slowly and how it works. I can explain why the extra two years of Ground Work produces better Performance and Longevity of your Equine's Use-life. After I give my speech, I take them out to see my equines to observe in person the actual results of the training program. The beauty of it all is that these are not young animals. They are equines born here and Rescues between the ages of 25 and 35 that have had the long-term benefit of my training approach. There is not a hint of *Arthritis* in their bodies. They look like they're nine or ten years old. I keep diaries and document everything that I'm doing with them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

When I went to visit a mule I donated named *Allie* at Hearts and horses after not working with her for 16 years and tried to lead her, she aggressively pulled me forward. I went into my Leading Position, Pointing in the Direction of Travel, Looking in the Direction of Travel and I said, "*Allie, Walk On.*" I tried to walk a straight line, but *Allie* was not walking a straight line.

I asked the Volunteers that were standing there, "*Have you been consistently teaching everyone how to lead the equines properly in Good Posture?*"

They replied, "*Oh yeah, yeah. We've been doing it.*"

As we moved along, I said, "*Allie's telling me you haven't because Allie is knocking me off sideways when I'm trying to go forward instead of obediently keeping her head at my shoulder as she should. Equines are always completely honest with their responses to you.*"

Then I said to *Allie*, "*And Whoa.*" I had to jerk on the Lead Rope abruptly to get her to stop. I tried to set up her body Four-Square. She could not get into proper alignment. Her hooves were pointed in different directions and not in line with her body. Her pelvis was twisted sideways. If Good Postural Leading is not done routinely, consistently and properly, the equine will not be able to habitually travel correctly in good posture.

Allie would not even be able to do the Hourglass Pattern right now because she hadn't practiced it in 16 years. I was looking at her spine and thinking about what Dr. Haussler said when he was evaluating *Rock*, "*This guy is probably going to have an erratic line from his ears to his tail through his spine, because he's been shifting weight all over the place.*"

It reminded me that it took a whole year before *Rock* was able to walk in Good Posture back in 2010. At one point *Rock* got *laminitis* and his balance was drastically shifting. We asked the whole team to come out, including our second Chiropractor Dr. Haussler from Colorado State University.

When he came out, he looked at him and he said, "*It's laminitis. We're going to have to soak his feet for about 20 minutes in buckets three times a day for several days.*" Well, it was October and 20 degrees outside!

The buckets I had were five-gallon buckets. *Rock's* right hind hip was shattered and he couldn't lift his foot that high. I said, "*NO WAY! That isn't going to happen.*" My Ranch Manager, Chad had a brilliant idea, "*Let's just dig a trench with the backhoe, line it with rubber so it can hold water and add Pea Gravel for traction. We'll fill it with water and get an Industrial Strength Ice Maker so we'll have plenty of ice. We'll excavate a ramp on both sides so he can walk into it and walk straight out of it.*" ***That worked just perfectly.***

Then Dr. Haussler said, *"With this laminitis, he's probably been twisting his spine and throwing most of the weight forward to the opposite front foot from this lameness and pain that he's got in this hip."* After further observation, he said *"Well, this mule has not been just transferring weight from the right hind to the left front. He has been transferring that pain to the other three legs. He's been dispersing it and he has not torqued his spin, but I should take a look from above anyway"*

I said to Dr. Haussler, "Okay. Go ahead, get on the ladder and take a look."

He got up on the ladder and was astonished, "I don't believe it. His spine is perfectly straight from head to tail. How did you do that?" I explained to Dr. Haussler about the Postural Core Strength Exercises that I had been doing with all of my mules.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, wow.

During a bout with **White Line Disease**, *Roll* was maintaining conditioning pretty much on his own with moderate turnout daily. I did not want to add any stress to his routine while his left hind hoof was still badly compromised. I was pleased to see that all the Core Strength Postural Leading lessons that *Roll* had for the past six years were firmly cemented in his brain. Over the past ten months, I watched him doing his straight forward walking exercises in Good Equine Posture and he continued to Square Up every time he stopped to rest. ***It truly has become his natural way of moving and kept the weight evenly distributed over all four feet during his recovery with the help of shoes on the other three feet to keep the hooves on the Healthy Feet from wearing unevenly from the added weight-bearing.***

*If you would like to see a detailed documentary of how many things can go wrong when you don't teach your equine about Core Strength in a Balanced Posture, check out **ROCK & ROLL: THE STORY OF A RESCUE** offered on my website at www.luckythreernch.com under TRAINING /THOSE MAGNIFICENT MULES.*

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow. Oh, yeah, I saw that. I saw that. That's cool.

Meredith:

Chastity came to us very obese with a huge crest on her neck with bad conformation and extreme Lordosis (way backed with an overly elevated croup and tipped pelvis). **Doing the Postural Core Strength Leading exercises with the Elbow Pull in the Hourglass Pattern significantly changed her posture and way of going.** She became even from her withers to her croup across her top line after several months of consistent postural work. She was a real mess when she first came in. She also had a bacterial infection in her teats that was just terrible to try to control. We succeeded significantly changing her posture and kept the infection under control for three years, but eventually the bacterial infection became systemic and we lost her. You can see *Chastity's* story on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under *TRAINING/CHASITY'S CHALLENGES* and under *TRAINING/TRAINING TIPS #122: GROUNDWORK FOR DONKEYS*.

When I got my mini donkeys, I did the same thing with them and called the diary *ANOTHER AUGIE & SPUDS ADVENTURE*. I documented all of their lessons and put their diary under *TRAINING* on the website at www.luckythreeranch.com.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah. I love that.

Meredith Hodges:

We're always doing something. I'm totally obsessed with mules and I learn something new with them every day. I don't think I will ever run out of information to share with people. My main purpose for doing this is to share the information with people so that they can enjoy their animals as much as I enjoy mine.

It really helps you to get through the hard times when you share what you learn. I think people thought that I was a know-it-all. I've just tried to let them know that there is so much to learn that you can never really know it all.

To date, we have done *CREATING THE JASPER CAROUSEL* that is all about *Bonnie Shields, Robin Laws* and how we built this miniature carousel in the backyard of the *JASPER BUNKHOUSE*. "*We have to keep a beautiful place, guys.*" So we developed the *JASPER BUNKHOUSE* and thought it would be really good for the kids' *TOURS*.

We made the inside of the Jasper Bunkhouse, like you're walking into the Jasper storybooks. It's all painted like the inside of the books in red, green and blue. From doing our *Jasper* DVDs, we had a small version diorama of the *Happy Valley Ranch* that's in the book. *Bonnie Shields* came out and painted a mural of the background of the *Happy Valley Ranch* on the wall.

We finally decided to do a documentary titled ***LUCKY THREE RANCH HAY PRODUCTION*** that you can also see on the website under *TRAINING/THOSE MAGNIFICENT MULES*. We also have several BISHOP MULE DAYS documentaries that you can see under TRAINING. All of these videos can be viewed for FREE! We built the *Old Western Town of ASPEN* and are currently doing a short video about that to be posted on the website under the *BLOG* and *TRAINING/INSPIRATIONAL VIDEOS* in June of 2026. We are celebrating *America's 250th Birthday* with short videos posted on the BLOG monthly and under *TRAINING/INSPIRATIONAL VIDEOS*.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(Laughs) That is wonderful. We've talked before about mules, progressing through the years. We know that they've been treated like the red-headed stepchild. We're all working so hard to get proper recognition and respect for the mule. Where do you see the mule going in the future?

Meredith Hodges:

Well, in order to predict the future, you need to look at the past. *The American Donkey and Mule Society* was just a drop in the bucket back then. They had been in existence since 1967. When I got on board, I thought they were maligning mules and I heard all those old sayings like "*Stubborn as a mule, you gotta hit 'em with a two by four,*" and other negative things."

I began taking a little different approach and used good manners to be accepted by the Horse Show Management. I would say, "*I understand if you don't want me at your show, but I would be willing to wait in the parking lot and I would be willing to forfeit the ribbons if that helps.*"

"I just want to compete to gauge my Horsemanship and my mule's Performance progress. That's what's really important to me." I found myself going to the U.S.D.F. Convention in 1984 to try to get mules into Dressage. *The Rocky Mountain Dressage Society* was very accepting and allowed me to train and compete with them. I was eventually accepted into *Combined Training*. And as I was doing all these things, I didn't realize it, but I was inspiring people across the country try the same thing. A lot of us older people *now* started the surge in the mule industry and built it into what it is today. We started with barely 10,000 mules in the country that were being used recreationally. Now there are literally millions of mules and donkeys in this country.

Meredith Hodges:

I just feel so grateful to see how the mule industry has grown. I believe our industry is actually stronger because we had to go through so many trials and tribulations to get our mules into the shows. We had to start our own clubs from scratch, to establish our rule books and points programs. We really had to work at it. ***When you work hard and put in the time in to build things from the ground up, you learn not to take things for granted.*** I do think outdoor rural recreational activities working with horses, mules and donkeys is the healthiest thing you can do for yourself. We mule people are so creative that we find things all kinds of things to do with them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Exactly.

Meredith Hodges:

Since I competed against horses with my mules and inspired other riders to do the same, the Longears industry has greatly expanded beyond our wildest dreams. There are so many riders out there doing so many wonderful things I'm so proud of *Katie Wetteland* because she and her mule *Mjöltnir* got mules accepted by the *U.S.E.A. Hunter Jumper Association*.

"Who Says Mules Can't Jump?"

December 3, 2019 DeAnn Sloan DeAnn Long Sloan #JUMPING, #MULES, #USHJA, PetitionComments Off on Who Says Mules Can't Jump?

"Hey, baby, I don't mean to brag... but I'm the greatest." — Mjöltnir the Longear's inner monologue"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, wow.

Meredith Hodges:

People like *Laura Hermanson* and her mule *Heart B Dyna* was the first mule to be accepted into the U.S.D.F. Finals in Dressage Kentucky Horse Park against World Class horses. They did a beautiful job.

When I spoke to some horse trainer friends of mine, they asked, "*Have you got any suggestions about how to improve the horse industry? Interest is failing and we're losing people.*"

I flat told them, "*You really need to pay more attention to the Grassroots people and don't take them for granted. Share your information for free. You shouldn't make things so expensive that nobody can afford it. One thing about mule people is that they are willing share and not charge people at all for most things. When I started showing my mule at the horse shows, local shows were \$5 a class. Now, it's \$50. If you want to get people in your industry, you need to make it affordable for them. Mule people do that. A lot of our shows are not expensive at all and you don't win money. You might win a ribbon, halter or equipment, things that you can use. When you approach things from that standpoint, it encourages people to join with you and it helps the industry to grow.*"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Even in the wintertime when the snow's on the ground, I still go out and do Groundwork with my animals just by virtue of literally playing with them.

Those are the kinds of things that help you to grow as a trainer and a rider. Even when you're playing silly games like that with your equines, you're developing a really deep bond and an intense relationship with your animal. When you do something serious, they're more inclined to take you seriously listen to you and try to learn what you're teaching. If you're patient, take your time and break things down into small steps, you can be successful not only with the equines, but with people as well.

Meredith Hodges:

Young people that are coming into the mule industry are also pioneering new ways to enjoy their mules and donkeys. They're doing things with their Longears that even the horse people won't do. When you foster a deep and abiding relationship with your mules, they will try absolutely everything and anything you want to do. I have seen some pretty spectacular exhibitions at shows. I saw a guy riding two dun mules standing on their backs Roman style and jumping! These kinds of acts bring in spectators and grow the sport!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(Laughs) Well, that this is all good stuff. It's very uplifting the industry is growing and getting stronger. And it's just, like you said, because the founders and all of that they've gone through.

Meredith Hodges:

I absolutely do see technology as a problem. My rule of thumb was when I go out with my animals I leave my phone in the house. I have found that if it's buzzing when I'm working with them, it breaks the connection between me and my animal. It breaks the lines of communication. I know that people that developed technology meant well and thought it would enhance communication between people, but it hasn't turned out that way. I think it's actually done the opposite. I think we're a whole lot better off when we're talking Face to Face. I think it is better to hand-write letters to people that are at a distance because it's more personal. You develop a real interest in the person you are communicating with that will build a deeper bond.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Technology has dissociated us from our deep, heartfelt feelings that we can get from enjoyment with our animals when we are given the time to work with them. I'm a remote trainer and I use the internet via my website to help people all the time. I used to be on Social Media and a member of over 50 groups on the internet.

I watched the comments, encouraged people to email me, and I would send them information all the time. I found that to be a way to give people disjointed bits and pieces, but not the whole picture.

So I canceled my cell phone, kept my office phone and went off Social Media. Now I have all my 50 years of Management and Training information posted on my website in all kinds of formats for FREE. If people want their own copies of my books, videos and documentaries, they can see what they are all about and purchase them in the STORE on the website at www.luckythreeranch.com. I take phone calls and will talk with people as long as they want to talk so I can get all their questions answered. *It's a much better approach and much more personal!*

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

I just love visiting with you. You are awesome lady.

Meredith's website is Luckythreeranch.com and you can call her at 1 800-816-7566, and I can be reached through my website, everycowgirlsdream.com.

Gotta go. My mule is looking for me.

Speaker 3:

Mule Talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production.

RESOURCES:

WEBSITE at www.LuckyThreeRanch.com /TRAINING:

- 1) Another Augie & Spuds Adventure
- 2) Chasity's Challenges
- 3) Longears Music Videos
- 4) Mule Crossing Articles
- 5) Mule Facts
- 6) Podcast Appearances
- 7) Training Tips
- 8) Rock & Roll: Diary of a Rescue
- 9) What's New With Roll?
- 10) Video On Demand
- 11) Wrangler's Donkey Diary

BOOKS/VIDEOS IN THE STORE:

- 1) Training Mules & Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Training
- 2) A Guide to Raising & Training Mules
- 3) Donkey Training
- 4) Training Without Resistance
- 5) Equine Management & Donkey Training
- 6) Equus Revisited Manual
- 7) Equus Revisited Video
- 8) Rock & Roll Documentary
- 9) Building the Jasper Carousel
- 10) LTR Hay Production
- 11) The Road to Bishop
- 12) The Bishop Experience
- 13) The Bishop All Stars
- 14) Walk On: Exploring Therapeutic Riding
- 15) Building of a Nation
- 16) Give Your Equine the Athletic Edge
- 17) For Children: www.JasperTheMule.com for books & videos