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**TELL THEM  
YOU READ  
IT IN  
RIDING**



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# Horses In The Hood

By Donna Gulnac

Building a high-quality community riding facility in Watts, the inner city neighborhood of South Los Angeles, may seem an improbable ambition, but that's exactly what veteran horsewoman Kathy Kusner plans to do. Kusner, who has almost made a career of achieving the "impossible," founded Horses in the Hood Los Angeles (HHLA) in 1999 in order to realize her dream of bringing together at-risk inner city children and horses.

Kusner's résumé is as long as it is impressive. She is a three-time Olympian in show jumping and is the first American woman to win a medal in an equestrian event in the Olympics. In 1968, she won a court case in Maryland to become the first licensed woman jockey in the United States. Her many extraordinary accomplishments include: jumping up to 7'2" in international puissance jumping competitions; running in 91 marathons and 57 ultra-marathons (to date); working as a Lear Jet pilot for Executive Jet Aviation; scuba diving all over the world and giving riding clinics across the United States and abroad. For the past 20 years, she has served as an expert witness on horse-related issues in legal matters. Kusner, however, is exceedingly modest and invariably diverts the focus from herself to what she is hoping to achieve with the children of Watts through her public benefit organization.

Kusner came up with the idea for Horses in the Hood after the Watts riots in 1992. She recognized that this was a community in need and wanted to help, so she decided to draw on her considerable expertise as a horsewoman. Though her long-term aspiration is quite grand, her most immediate goal is simply to introduce the children to a new experience. "When you're a kid, you don't know what's out there," she says. She hopes that by introducing them to horses, they'll question what other opportunities they might be missing and become more curious about the world.

Kusner estimates that her ultimate goal of building a riding school in Watts will take about \$14 million. She has already picked out a five-acre industrial parcel in Watts and the proposed plans for the facility are featured prominently on the HHLA Web page ([www.hhla.org](http://www.hhla.org)). Until this horse center is built in the children's neighborhood, Kusner is bringing the children to the horses. Her current program is a Monday through Friday day camp, which has been held at several riding facilities throughout Southern California; this summer, all of the camps have been taught at Mill Creek Equestrian Center in Topanga.

Kusner met Mill Creek's owner Cory Walkey a number of years ago when she gave a riding clinic at the stables and they've been friends ever since. Kusner is grateful that the camps are being held at this "beautiful" facility and Walkey feels "fortunate to be in a position to make Mill Creek available to Horses in the Hood."

## Who Are The Children?

The children are selected from the half dozen or so participating organizations, which each have a week in which they can send up to 12 children. Kusner finds these organizations through word of mouth or by simply driving around Watts and knocking on doors, and allows each to identify its own campers.

Beverly Williams, the Executive Director of Improved Community Achievement Recreational Education Program in the

*Sisters Michell and Alejandra Moya show off their blue ribbons and awards certificates on the last day of camp*



participating Bradley/Milken Center, selects the horse camp students based on need and individual circumstances. Sometimes her choices are driven by a family's financial situation and sometimes because they have a "streak of incorrigibility" and

*Asia Brooks and Alejandra Moya with Belgian Draft horse "Annie"*



are severely at risk. She notes that "children are a mirror of what's going on around them" and some of these children are "doing inhumane things to dogs." Because this behavior may portend more serious offenses in the future, she knows she has to be "hands on" and redirect them "to learn respect for animals." She views Horses in the Hood as the perfect opportunity to turn them around. Through HHLA, she has "seen what nurturing a horse can do." Even

though horses are large, imposing animals they can be controlled with proper handling, which is a powerful lesson for these children.

As of August 2003, about 400 children have attended a total of 28 camps since the program's inception. More information about HHLA participating groups can be found on the website [www.hhla.org](http://www.hhla.org).

## What Happens At Camp?

The children do not receive any special advance training; they learn everything on site. HHLA provides them with a pair of paddock boots, and helmets are supplied either by HHLA or the hosting stable. They are given a book called *Happy Horsemanship* by Dorothy Henderson Pinch, which explains equine basics from the perspective of the horse. Each participant also receives a disposable camera to document his or her experience and the pictures are developed and returned to the children on the last day of camp.

Many of them have never been in contact with a real horse before. Laura Grass is the instructor for all of the Horses in the Hood riding sessions at Mill Creek. "They are very quiet when they first arrive because it's



*Horseshoer Robbie Cozart directs "assistant" Javier to drop a hot horse shoe into a bucket of water as part of the tempering process*



so quiet here. Everything is suddenly changed for them; the people are different and their surroundings are different... They are very nervous and don't know what to do. It's the whole experience, not just the horses."

Grass has learned that making the children comfortable around the horses is more a matter of getting them to trust her and the other volunteers, than of trusting the horses. Because they have an "innocence" or "ignorance" about horses, "they don't know that anything bad can happen," she says.

In addition to riding, the children are taught about many aspects of horsemanship. They learn to groom, bathe, saddle and bridle the horse and are taught care, feeding, breed and color basics, often in fun ways like the "horse treasure hunt." Guest experts are also on the agenda. Equine veterinarians Charlie Boles and Kirstie Timm visit each camp to teach the kids a little about what they do. One week they brought an ultrasound machine to test a horse's leg for injury and ended up giving ultrasounds to all of the kids. The children went home with an ultrasound "picture" of an arm or a stomach. Dr. Boles is a kind, patient, grandfatherly figure, who charms all of the kids. He made a horse anatomy lesson seem relevant to them by using the bones from a real horse leg and showing which bones in the horse's front leg and hoof corresponded to the bones in his own arm and hand. Farrier Robbie Cozart is another popular visitor.

The riding, however, is the main focus. Children ride twice a day: usually a trail ride and an arena lesson. Instructor Grass is amazed by how quickly they learn and some clearly have a lot of natural talent. The kids learn that riding is essentially communicating with the horse. Grass notes that this is "a new way to communicate—different from anything they've ever done in their lives."

The children also get closer to nature when riding in the surrounding mountains. Merete Goldberg is a regular volunteer and uses her trusted horse Tom Cat as the lead horse on most of trail rides. According to Goldberg, the kids are very excited about the Topanga wildlife. "You should see these kids when the bunnies go by," she exclaims. "They practically fall off their horses trying to get a closer look at them."

Towards the end of the week, the kids begin to work on their presentation for the last day, when parents and families are invited for a pizza party and to watch the children give an exhibition of what they've learned that week. Sometimes there is a large group of guests, sometimes there are just one or two. The students ride in a pattern around the arena and through a number of obstacles at both the walk and the trot. When they have all completed the course, an "awards ceremony" is held, the kids beaming when they receive their big blue ribbon and personalized certificate.

#### What Do The Children Think?

Having the camps at Mill Creek brings a couple of unexpected bonuses. The journey to Topanga takes the children along the Pacific Coast Highway; for many, it's their first

*continued from page 101*

glimpse of the ocean even though Watts is only 12 miles inland. The children are also awed by the number of trees at the barn and in the surrounding Santa Monica Mountains. One of the campers told owner Cory Walkey that she just loved it "up here in the forest."

Beautiful surroundings aside, the part of camp the kids unanimously love the best is the riding. Laura Grass observed that their "innocence" tends to work for them. "They have no preconceived notion of horses...Once they know they are safe...they become sponges." She says they "always laugh the first time they trot;" the bounciness of it is unexpected. Nevertheless, the kids very quickly learn to post the trot: some almost instantly and all by the end of the week.

Grass says the children's growing confidence is reflected in their posture. They start out looking a little nervous and slouching and by the end of the week they are sitting up straight on the horses. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, these kids have control over something. Grass adds that being able to control such a large animal "makes them stand tall, mentally and physically." One little girl, Jamie Sandoval, told Grass that "I didn't even think I could get on, but I turned out to be one of the best riders!" Another student, 8-year-old Javier, told volunteer Mallory Kass that "when I first came today, I was scared, but now I'm not because I can do it!"

While the children love to ride, they are also content to brush the horses or to offer them buckets of water. They take great pride in doing a good job of grooming or tacking up the horses.

The last day of camp is bittersweet for Grass. "The kids always ask me, 'Can I come back?'" Some of the kids have already begun scheming about how they can ride again. Abby Dufretay, of Shields For Families, fondly recounts one girl's plan to save up to take another riding lesson. She saw from the price list that it costs \$30 for a lesson, so she calculated that she could work for her uncle for six Saturdays at \$5 per day in order to earn enough money for another chance to be on a horse.

Even though the children may never have another opportunity to ride, the memories and the sense of pride and accomplishment they take away from this experience are things they will have for the rest of their lives.

#### A Win-Win Situation

Everyone involved is affected by Horses in the Hood. Families are thrilled by progress demonstrated in the final day's exhibition. Instructor Grass says she feels almost "selfish" and worries that she is getting more out of the program than the kids. She says the volunteers have also gained confidence and "blossomed." "I have watched them open up and learn from this experience," she states. Owner Cory Walkey has observed this as well and has been "very pleased and impressed" with this development. Walkey notes that these volunteers—who are mostly high school students who grew up around horses—have really learned to be more patient and giving

over the course of these camps. She thinks it's been great for them that they've had this chance to "work with kids who have a much different background from their own."

Mill Creek runs its own day camp every summer for young children. These kids live mostly in the nearby communities of Calabasas, Pacific Palisades, Santa Monica and other parts of the Valley and Westside. The "traditional" day campers were at the barn during all of the HHLA camps. At first these campers were a bit shy and apprehensive towards the HHLA kids. As the summer progressed, however, they became eager to help with Horses in the Hood as much as possible. Grass feels the program has been good for "breaking down barriers" and for helping her, and others at Mill Creek, to better "appreciate what we have."

It costs about \$300 per child for the five day horse camp. Horses in the Hood welcomes your tax deductible donations, which can be used to sponsor a camp or toward building a permanent riding facility in Watts. Make checks payable to Horses in the Hood.

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For more pics and letters from the kids see the "Kids Corral" on page 127

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Rayonna Crooks gives "Bracken" a hug at the end of her lesson

August 20, 2004

Dear Mill Creek,

I like how you treated us to ride horses. I wish I could come back but I can't. I miss that a lot. He is really cute. How is Annie doing? I like him too. I especially like Bowen and Comanche. In my sister's computer she put Mill Creek Equestrian Center said she liked on it. The you telephone number appeared and we copied it. We saw all the school horses and the harness. Please to me back.

Your friend  
Dalya



Equine veterinarians Charlie Boles and Kirstie Timm show the kids how the ultrasound machine works




Dalya Sandoval, from the Florence Griffith-Joyner Elementary School "Healthy Start Program," riding Pollyanna on the final camp day exhibition.

Dear Mill Creek,

August 23, 2003

I love how you treated us. I love the horses in there. Especially Bracken, Comanche and Bowen. I forgive everyone. But I did have and I wish I could keep him and Comanche and Bowen. I drew a picture of Bracken. I have a computer in my room. I have to share with my brother and sisters. But I don't use it right. I went to my computer and put Mill Creek horses. Then I said Mill Creek Equestrian Center. I liked on it and I saw the name of all the school horses. I want to wish you be were kind of give me only work. But I still love my dad is August 24, 1982. Mom and dad want going to presents really. But I don't care. I just can't live without care so we give. Please write like in the old remember. I was the girl who sell of diamond. I hope to go again to Mill Creek. your friend, Jamie.




David Sykes rides "Annie" through an obstacle course during the exhibition on the last day of camp

**August answers**

1. beggars 2. Foot 3. Head 4. Horse 5. Color 6. Kingdom 7. Mouth 8. Gift
9. Grey 10. White 11. Old 12. Short (little) 13. Colt 14. Eaten 15. Hungry
16. One 17. Excellent 18. Stolen 19. Blind 20. Horse
21. Whipping (beating, flogging) 22. Inside 23. Water
24. Horses 25. Meadow 26. Nail