



Liz's unique perspective on horses gives her a special connection and ability to communicate and understand them.

FULL of Joy

By Lynda Bloom Layne

Getting to Know Liz Graves

Liz Graves' voice chimes with joy when she talks about what horses have done for her life. As a sought after trainer and judge, a popular clinician, an accomplished artist and writer, her talents have clearly been cultivated by her intense love for horses and what they have given her in return.

"They've helped me find out who I am," she says reverently. "They've taught me to be a good human, a good listener, teacher and leader. I am who I am because of them. It's that simple."

By example

AND EXACTLY WHO IS LIZ GRAVES? HER ACCENT CLEARLY identifies her as Minnesota born and raised. Her fair appearance is a dead giveaway to her Scandinavian roots. But to understand who Liz is, the first step is to examine the upbringing of her mother, Alaskan born

Louise Nelson, who fought the odds to become a horsewoman.

Louise's father (Liz's grandfather) was in the military. "He was an airman who loved to fly," Liz explains. "He didn't have any use for horses and he didn't like that she was so horse nuts."

But Louise did love horses, loved to ride and vowed to learn all she could about them, starting at an early age. One might think military bases would be the last place to find qualified riding instructors, but quite the contrary. Liz explains, "My mother was taught by what were probably some of the finest Cavalry men in the U.S. Army. Some of them had come back from Europe, where they'd learned a lot from the masters. What they were bringing back was phenomenal. That's where her classical background - and mine - came from, through the Cavalry riding influence during her youth."

By the time Louise was grown, married, and living in Minnesota, it was clear to everyone around her, and especially to her children, that she had a gift for passing on what she'd learned about horses.

She became what Liz describes as "a phenomenal teacher." Looking back at her own youth, Liz recalls watching her mother train horses, ponies and kids, coaching them at home and at shows, and instilling

values in the riders that would last a lifetime. "To her, it was all about sportsmanship and developing good character," Liz says. "She'd haul two trailer loads of kids and horses to a show. I never once heard her criticize another rider. And, she never made a criticism about a judge."

If any of her riders did criticize, they had to sit out the next show. Jealousy or fighting were also grounds for bench warming. Liz's strong sense of ethics blossomed from her mother's example.

Growing up in the saddle

THE DELIGHT OF RIDING GOOD PONIES AS A SMALL CHILD was a thrill Liz will never forget. The name of her first pony is also something that isn't likely to slip her mind -- Purple Pony Skin. Liz laughs when she offers an explanation. "She was a dappled gray and

in the sun, she had this purple shine, like a peeled onion.”

In the eyes of a child, and now, looking back, “Purple Pony Skin was beautiful.” And the beauty wasn’t just on the surface. It deeply penetrated this short-legged Shetland, who for years was Liz Graves’ best friend. “She took care of me,” Liz recalls, adding that the little mare knew she was the babysitter entrusted with her human’s safety.

Like most kids, imagination and games were at the forefront. “I’d play cowboys and Indians and fall off of her,” Liz recalls. “She’d come over, take her little hoof and tap me to make sure I was alive.”

Purple Pony Skin, and others that Liz rode, put to rest the myth that “all ponies” are difficult or spoiled. The ones at Liz’s place were Louise-schooled. Liz says, “I had good experiences with ponies. My mother trained them like they were horses.”

Sometimes, the arena would be filled with riders on these small equines. “I remember my mother having 12 little kids on ponies, making these perfect little circles.” Most of Louise’s schedule was devoted to training other people’s horses and children - but a special part of each day went to Liz. Every day, Liz was given a one-hour lesson. Now, Liz does recognize it as 60 minutes of riding instruction, but back then, she says, “I never thought of it as a lesson. It was something that she and I did



Liz aboard the prize of her childhood, pony and friend, PURPLE PONY

together every single day. To me, it was my time with my mom.”

Liz adored her mother and still does. It was a horrifying time in their lives when a horse flipped over and broke Louise’s back. Liz was about 12 years old then. She recalls, “That ended my moth-

er’s riding career, but it didn’t stop her from teaching.” But with a barn full of horses to ride, Liz was drafted. “I was the one put on all of the training horses. My mother was on the ground every minute with me, working me through every horse.” These were mostly what Liz calls stock horse types, and they were being readied for a variety of events. Liz and her mother were a team, producing horses that could do just about anything.

School was still an important part of Liz’s life. “I loved it,” she says. “I was a good student, really into art and intense in math.”

Liz’ mother kept all of the school experiences positive. “If I had a bad teacher,” Liz says, “my mother was always able to turn it around and make it positive, so I could face the next day, or year.”

It seemed the ideal happily-ever-after life. But a few years later, everything changed. Liz’s parents divorced and her father got custody of the three children - Liz and her two brothers. “My father remarried when I was 16. Two weeks after the wedding, my step-mother told me I wasn’t wanted -- that I had to pack my bags and



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Liz and Tennessee Walking Horse mare, DARK MIDNIGHT SHADES, share a quiet moment.

leave.” Liz was out on her own. She had to quit school and work.

She remembers it as “A long hard road. But by golly, it made me strong and got me to the place I am now. I might be sad about some of the past, but I’m not bitter.” Hard times, in Liz’ mind, build character. And she was nothing short of a comeback kid. She worked hard, got a GED, and started rebuilding her life.

On her own

THE DECISION TO LEAVE MINNESOTA was not easy, but at age 18, Liz moved to Virginia. The prospect of starting her own training business looked promising, but she also had a back up plan. “I took two years of Equine Science at Blue Ridge College, and also put myself through cosmetology school. I taught cosmetology on the side, while I was training horses in Virginia.”

She also took several college psychology classes, which helped form the foundation for her future of training, teaching and giving clinics. “I knew animals well and grew up being able to easily communicate with them. But people confused me and I wanted to learn

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Liz's long time friend and companion, Bubba, shown at age 26.

more about them.” She knew that the way to reach a horse’s mind is through that of his owner. “I had to learn about humans so I could teach them. Now, I read people very much in the same way I read horses - through their body language, eyes and expressions. And, I’m really quick at evaluating people and deciding how I need to open a door to get them where they need to go.”

Going Gaited

AN EXPERIENCE WHEN SHE MOVED TO Virginia in 1978 changed Liz’s life. Her future and direction with horses became suddenly crystal clear during one ride on a black Tennessee Walking Horse stallion that captivated her. “His name was Top Man. He was coal black, big and beautiful,” Liz recalls. She was at a farm looking at Walkers. “I didn’t know a thing about them,

and was trying to learn about the breed. The man who owned the place raised them. He asked if I wanted to ride Top Man.”

Since she’d ridden a lot of stallions, she wasn’t the least bit intimidated by the horse. And, she says, “He was really very sweet and kind. He was confident and calm in his energy.”

There was no arena. Horses were ridden around the farm, up and down the road, and through the woods. So this is where Liz rode the stallion. The horse’s owner called out, “Now, push him up into gait.”

“I didn’t know what ‘the gait’ was.”

Liz admits. But when she urged the stallion forward, she says, “I was just blown away! I’d never felt anything like it in my life! That was it! I’ve had gaited horses ever since.”

And since that day on the Virginia farm, Liz has ridden plenty of other Walkers, including her now retired show gelding, who is a son of Top Man. She’s also been aboard Spotted Saddle Horses, Missouri Fox Trotters, Paso Finos, Icelandics and Peruvians, showing several different breeds. “There’s not a gaited breed I haven’t done now,” she says.

Training and Teaching

GROWING UP, LIZ PAID CLOSE ATTENTION to how horses thought, moved and responded. But new theories formed at a rocket-like pace as she eased into her new niche in the gaited horse world. She spent 18

years in Virginia, focusing her keen eye on details. “I rode everything I could,” she says. “I kept journals on every horse. I analyzed and applied a lot of what I knew from my stock horse background, about good basic structure and conformation. I started measuring horses and asking myself ‘what are the differences?’ I analyzed footfall sequences, what their backs were like and what their pelvises and femurs were doing.” She knew she would have to find a way to put her findings into words and actions so she could teach riders. It wasn’t long before she developed a system.

Now, at her clinics, she says, “I mark up the horses. I might put Vetrap on the legs or sticky dots on all the points of the bones. I’ll mark or tape up the riders, so they can figure out how to keep their spine in line with the horse’s spine. I use anything and everything I can to give visual aids.”

Liz also became what she calls, “A toucher of horses. I do a lot of hands on, holding them, bringing them into my heart so they can feel my calm energy, which I try to transfer to them. I take deep breaths and breathe out while I’m holding them. They learn to breathe, too.” When a horse lowers his head and opens his larynx, she explains, “He can breathe deeply and he becomes more relaxed.” This method is another one that she



Liz's little brother, Wayne (also a critter person), Liz and mother, Louise Nelson.

Liz Graves Clinic by Karen Howard

I attended Liz Grave's weekend clinic in Winchester, CA. I am so glad that I went! She knows more about gaited horses than anyone I've seen. Certainly she is among the top 10 experts anywhere on this subject.

The horses really love her. I'm sure they understand that she cares about them. **She always puts the horse first**, in front of horse show requirements, fads and whims of those who would like beautiful ornaments, rather than happy, healthy, sound horses.

She is a wonderful teacher, in that she explains everything very well, and is willing to answer any and all questions. She is a walking encyclopedia of horse facts. I learned so much that will help me with my own horse. It will also save me money, as I won't throw away a lot of money on the wrong tack.

This was the friendliest clinic I have ever been to. Seemed like everyone had a sense of humor and was willing to talk and share ideas, information and stories. It was more like a party, than "a serious activity"; really a lot of fun, in spite of the monsoonish weather that we had on Saturday. We all know that horses learn more when not under stress, and I'm sure people are the same way!

The clinic covered in great detail: saddle fits, biting fits, sidepulls vs bits, treeless saddles vs treed saddles, visual demonstration of why certain horses are built to rack better than others, why some tend to pace more or trot more, things like that. Saddles and bits were confusing to me. I didn't know why some worked and why they didn't. On the rainy day, Liz did LOTS of saddle fits and we could see exactly why the saddle didn't fit, and then, how it could be fixed.

A number of horses and riders showed their horses at the gait they were working on. Liz would adjust the saddle and bit as necessary, and (usually) ride the horse, showing how to help the horse carry himself better, how the rider could sit a little different, and in every case, the horse did much better. More relaxed, happier, and a better gait! Then the rider would get back on, and Liz would help the rider achieve the better result, too.



shares with horse owners. "I teach people at my clinics how to get their horses to breathe. When everybody does, everybody relaxes."

In today's fast paced world, people tend to grab air and take shallow breaths. "When we do that, we're tightening everything up," Liz explains. "We're not letting relaxation run through all of our muscles and all the way down to our feet. Horses sense that. If we are tight and wired, they are tight and wired. They are a reflection of who we are."

The beauty of deep breathing, with owner and horse in synch, is the feeling of oneness that occurs. Liz explains, "You are almost reading each other's thoughts, because you're feeling and working through each other's muscles. You meld together."

When Liz trains horses, getting them to relax is always on her mind. Music has entered the picture as a calming tool. It started because Liz absolutely loves music and found it pleasant to slip a CD into a boom box, put it on the rail, and listen to everything from rhythm and blues to New Age music as she rode. Now, she finds, "The horses love it, too. They relax immediately."

Outback Ranch

AS OF FEBRUARY, THE BOOM BOX RESTS ON A RAIL AT Outback Ranch in the Bluff Country of Minnesota. Liz is leasing space at what she excitedly calls, "A beautiful place. It's 1,000 acres and butts up against a national forest, so there's all this area to trail ride. There are major mountains. It's just gorgeous. I love the place and love the people I'm working with." The owners of the ranch are building Liz a new 12-stall horse barn with in-floor heating.

The ranch has electrical hookups, so, Liz says, "My clients can come and stay in their campers." There is also a rental cabin.

At home in Spring Grove

WHEN SHE'S NOT AT THE RANCH, LIZ is at home in the small town of Spring Grove with her life partner, Dave Genadek. "He owns a company called About the Horse," Liz says, "a saddle shop."

Liz is an artist experienced in many mediums and says that Dave shares that tendency. "He's very much an artist in his work. He does all his own drawings for his carvings."

It's not unusual for people who love horses to be artistic. "The horses bring out creativity in the thought process," Liz says, adding that, in her case, "There's something about hanging out in a barn that does a lot for me." In the past, she has done some pottery. She draws, and does 24-carat gold leaf. And, she used to sew all of her own side saddle habits. "Everything is art," she says. "Everything."

Painting is one of her passions - one she often uses to show her deep emotions about the good and bad parts of the horse industry.

Animals everywhere

LIZ'S MOTHER, WHO IS NOW RETIRED and living in Texas, was always taking in unwanted or abandoned critters, furred or feathered, and keeping herself surrounded with pets, from the normal to the unusual. It could be genetic. Maybe that is why Liz admits, "I've always had a pet duck."

The duck in residence now is 13. Liz acquired him when he was a day old. He's a lazy old guy now. Liz says, "He'd rather sit, talk and eat all day, than move." Liz and Dave built a special area in their house for the duck. "He's even got his own radio."

In addition to the duck, Liz and Dave have three dogs, and, of course, horses. Gaining the most notoriety is Bubba, Liz's 26-year-old Walker, the coal black son of Top Man that she has owned for 24 years. When he retired from the

ring, Liz hand made a quilt from all of the ribbons he garnered in his show career. "It's a wall hanging now."

This year, Bubba's likeness will be in homes across the country. Stone Mountain Horse Company, which makes model horse toys, has chosen Bubba as their model for their naturally gaited walker series. "My Bubba is going to be in the first edition!" Liz says. "It's going to have his name on it."

This is just one of the things that Liz Graves finds exciting about her life. She is thrilled with every experience of every day. "Upbeat" doesn't even come close to describing her energy and joy. Her enthusiasm is priceless and contagious. Just talking to her regenerates a person's soul.



Liz and her ever present pet duck.