

Taking It in Stride

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Beneath the steady gaze of the Arizona sun, Karen Carns grips the reins of a light gray gelding. Her focus is singular; her eyes are fixed on the course ahead as her body moves in one fluid motion with her horse, rising and falling in graceful athleticism in a partnership so exquisite that, for a moment, it is easy to become lost in their rhythm. Their pace remains steady as they stride in a rush of raw power, leaving behind a cloud of dust and the diminishing sound of the echo of lithe hooves giving pulse to the earth below.

Any attempt by pundits to label the duality of power and surrender, or to put into words the intuitive connection between horse and rider have fallen short. Language only limits the infinite capacity for the trust, respect and love developed through countless sweaty hours of discipline and dedication.

Through an unassuming entrance lined by well-manicured bushes and clean, white fencing stretches a 17-acre Desert Hills facility apportioned into jumping, dressage and cross country arenas. More than 30 long, narrow faces with carefully groomed manes with gentle strength greet visitors with curiosity, some from pristine barns and others from small green pastures nestled in serenity.

At 57 years old, Carns breathes a youthfulness that can only be seen in those whose happiness comes from within, and like most of the predominantly over-40 clientele of accomplished women who have discovered Carefree Farms, she has found balance and new purpose in the intelligent, kind eyes of a horse.

“When we get out here, we lose all track of time,” explains Carns, a former television news anchor for Phoenix’s KSAZ and KPHO. “In our careers, many of us are driven and almost hardened. Out here, we’re at peace. It’s different here.”

That sentiment is shared by so many women who spend time freed up by empty nests at the facility, grooming and exercising their horses and training for competitions. Nearly all still work to pay for the lessons, boarding and equipment needed to enjoy not only the sport, but the supportive camaraderie they find in the stables.

What in younger years may have erupted into divisive feminine energy has matured into self-confidence and a healthy respect for each other's talents and skills. The art of dressage, the precision of stadium jumping and the thrill of cross country jumping have breathed new and exciting life into women whose pursuit of accomplishment is not dissuaded by a few gray hairs.

Alice Sarno, the 64-year-old coach behind the impressive records of success many of the women have accomplished in arenas throughout the Southwest, has spent over 40 years honing her intuition and finding her own path in the sport.

"I've been into horses all my life," she says with the matter-of-fact tone of a woman who needs no lipstick to know her own worth. Her approach to horses is uniquely feminine; she's tough as nails but also nurtures the horses with a calming maternal instinct.

Many of the horses at Carefree Farms are retired race horses. When they arrive, they have never been treated with warmth or kindness, and like humans, they must learn to trust. "Horses are totally reliant on us. We have lots of horses that have been at the racetrack, and they have no personality when they come here. Part of the process is learning to understand what it requires for these horses to be comfortable and confident with riders on their backs."

She smiles from beneath the brim of her Western Cuenca cane hat. Her face reflects the hard-earned lines acquired through dedication and many a solid days' work. "To see riders figure that out is so exciting."

Sarno's partner, Laura Borghesani, whose job it is to manage the large farm and work with the feisty younger horses, raises her eyebrows in agreement and adds, "And to see the horse figure that out – that dynamic between the two is so exciting!"

As they speak, Carns' focus is fixed on a four-peaks fence in the show jumping arena. Her blond ponytail peeks out from beneath her helmet and bounces gracefully on her back as she and Lincoln, half quarter horse and half Connemara, spring over the obstacle. As the sun lowers, lights flicker on the arena and give horse and rider a nearly magical quality.

An apt competitor, Carns has embraced the cycle of reframing and reinventing her life that goes along with refusal to succumb to the mind-numbing emptiness of tedium. Now an interior designer, she defines success by her own terms. She's not only willing to get a little dirty, she's taken a few falls and proven to herself that she's not afraid to get back in the saddle. In forming her bond with her horse, she has found the courage to listen to her inner voice and the freedom to empower it.

"How many people do you know who go through their whole lives without having a passion?" asks Borghesani. "Here, we've all found that passion."

Perhaps most inspiring for Sarno and Borghesani is the quiet building of inner strength they witness and share. In the nearly six years that they've spent building relationships with horses and riders of all ages (including men and boys) at the facility, they've also created reality out of their own vision for success.

"I can't describe in words what this is, but I feel it," Borghesani says with warmth that resonates. Her smile is kind and authentic. "When we moved in here, I wanted that peace. I had a vision of creating that kind of place and having clientele who felt the same way. Seeing it turn into that makes me so proud."

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