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“Faith, Horses and Cowboy Church”

Stories about a butterfly, a saddlebag, vertigo, faith and the letter ‘J’

Anne Sloan, “Cowgirl Annie”, SL5, Lewisburg PA

When I conduct an interview for an article I’m writing, I treat each moment like a precious gift. Unless someone does public speaking for a living, where most sentences are professionally framed into a sound bite, nearly every person I interview simply speaks from the heart. They tell stories about themselves and through some prodding, that ignites the thought of another story which they continue to share over the course of an hour or so. I try to listen carefully so I can curate a metamorphosis of what I’ve heard into an interesting or perhaps even an inspirational message. I hope you enjoy reading this article as much as I enjoyed interviewing these wonderful equestrians.

Felisha Whitman, L1, Granby, Missouri, Home Health Director for Integrity Home Care and Hospice

This accomplished cowgirl named her horse “One Spiffy Cougar”, Titus, after one of the books in the bible. “Titus wasn’t a main character in the Bible. He was someone who helped teach others and helped build them up,” Felisha told me. “I love to teach, and I love to show others how to do things they are struggling with.”

In 2016, Felisha was in a horrible car accident that left her on crutches for a year and struggling with balance and strength even to this day. “When I finally started riding again, I had to learn to let go of fear and to rely on faith to get through,” she explained. Coming from a barrel racing and competitive trail riding background, she’s also lived a life of ranch work, horse training, team penning and team sorting. But she got into mounted shooting when she learned from her cow rancher grandfather the importance of being able to shoot off of a horse. “I love to shoot and I love to ride, but I was stuck on barrel racing and wasn’t open to other things,” she shared. “My grandfather always believed in me and taught me to never settle and to follow my dreams.”

But after the accident, she realized that life is too short. “I’ve always been a Christian my whole life. It’s how I was raised. But I never had a relationship with God until the accident,” Felisha said. She believes the accident was God’s way to tell her to focus on something else besides barrel racing. “Whenever I barrel raced, I loved the rush and the challenge of training horses. But with mounted shooting everything is different. The people are amazing and so willing to help out.”

Between the accident, the death of her grandfather and the shocking loss of a friend, Felisha knows that God provides us signs if we are doing something He wants us to do. “Through tough times, I always saw a brown butterfly. Two days before my friend died, I saw one and I found peace. Any time it was hard to get riding again or if I didn’t want to practice or ride, I would see a butterfly around the arena or around my horse. It made me both cry and smile.”

With birds chirping in the background during our phone call, Felisha stressed, “God knew I would not enjoy the little things until they were taken away. I have learned to trust Him. Our destiny has been planned. He has our best interests at heart, and we have to trust.” The accident has opened her eyes. “Appreciate the little things and never take any ride for granted. Each ride is a blessing we may not get back the next day. I got into mounted shooting after my accident when I realized life is too short, so I needed to live a life with no regrets.”



Felisha Whitman

Jared Penley, M6, Salem, Ohio, Penley Horsemanship

I've known Jared for about ten years now and have always been fascinated by his almost otherworldly connection with horses. When I interviewed him, Jared was quick to share stories of his passion for horses and how they deserve to be useful in this world. "From Mark 26: 'He molds us like clay' I've learned that molding is a kind and patient and slow process," Jared told me regarding his work with horses. Jared starts with the talent and the skills of the horse to encourage the positive attributes of the horse, not through a forceful process but through a patient process that shapes and molds.

"The Lord gives everyone a gift and I feel mine was the ability to communicate with horses. It started a long time ago. In my teens, rather than go to church, I knew I would rather throw a bible in my saddlebag and go for a ride and find a nice spot under a tree with a good view so I could read. That was my church. I got more out of that. Later, when I was on the ranch in Arizona, every Sunday, I would go for a ride with my bible in my saddle bag," Jared shared. "Horses have always been a kind of spiritual relationship for me," Jared continued. "I'm trying to be the best trainer I can be through the gifts of the Lord."

Jared shares those gifts not only through his training, but through clinics. "My brother has been a missionary in Ecuador for twelve years. My little brother is a pastor in North Carolina. I'm not a talker but by being a trainer and by doing horse clinics, I've become more comfortable talking in front of people." All of this led Jared to be asked to do cowboy church at



Jared & Cara Penley

PHOTO CREDIT: Timeless Treasures Photography

many mounted shooting events which he does with his wife Cara who sings. "Cowboy church is a way for the two of us to use the gifts we were given to share the word of the Lord."

"Through clinics, I believe the Lord put that in my life to get me more comfortable to do cowboy church. The first one I did I gave my testimony. I got very emotional. I was so nervous to speak in front of people," he said. That was at Northeast Regionals many years ago and since then, Jared has become more comfortable doing cowboy church.

Jared and his wife Cara, L6, are on the board for the CMSA Futurity and Derby. They sponsor the Draw Party, which brings together all the shooters before the start of one of the biggest CMSA events of the year. "I thank the Lord for blessing me," Jared said, explaining how he prays before every run he makes at events. "I ask for patience, knowledge, and clarity of mind. I've never been comfortable being at the center of attention," he added. "The Lord shapes us like clay, and I know He wants us to work for Him to glorify His name through the talents He gave us."

Jacqueline Materi, L2, Bismarck North Dakota, Healthcare

"Life passes you by before you know it," Jackie told me emphatically. In her region, many know of Jackie and her shooting family. Her husband and each of their three children are mounted shooters, all hooked on this wonderful sport. Yet Jackie offered to share her story very reticently. To be clear, Jackie wants to share her story, but it took a lot to finally decide to share.

Jackie just had a brain tumor removed, an acoustic neuroma it's called, and until this interview, she had not really shared her story with anyone but a few friends and family. "When I saw your post that you were looking to interview people for this article, I felt, 'This is so me!' but I was nervous. I've been silent and dealing with it on my own. But even with family, that wasn't enough. Going to church, and talking to God, that has really helped me. I want to share now," she explained.

"It all started over a year ago with acute severe vertigo accompanied by horrific nausea and vomiting. I was out of town, and I was comparing invoices in my hotel room. The numbers weren't lining up. I suddenly got nauseated. I found myself on the bathroom floor and the vertigo was like motion sickness on steroids. I couldn't get out of there alone. Finally, I called a coworker to help me get to the emergency room."

The next months were a struggle to understand what was wrong. There was physical therapy for vertigo, different medicines, repeated doctor visits and finally, an MRI with the result. Now, Jackie had some important decisions to make while trying to ride and manage a family and a career.

"I decided to wait to have surgery after Worlds," as Jackie explained that a side effect of surgery could have been so extreme as to prevent safe riding again. "I had fallen in love with mounted shooting and wanted to go out with a bang. I didn't know what I would have left after surgery." Some of the patterns were a terrible struggle for her. "There are patterns where you have to shoot left then right and back and forth. That eye stimulation was so hard for me," Jackie said.

In the time leading up to surgery, Jackie tried to do a lot of things with her family and horses that were meaningful. "My life has always been so busy." Jackie spoke with her Pastor and continued on her journey to get closer to God. "I listened to podcasts constantly and did a lot of reading." One book touched Jackie tremendously. "It spoke about giving myself to God. I always thought I had control of the reins of my life. Then I realized I had to give myself up to Him. I had to give HIM the reins."

"When I woke up from the surgery, the first thing I asked was, 'Am I smiling?'" One possible side effect was facial paralysis as well as a sixty percent chance of hearing loss. "I remember that first night I had such overwhelming peace. I didn't have to worry. I was praising God that He took care of me," Jackie said.

I asked Jackie where her faith is going now. "Even though I identified as a Christian and believed in God and went to church every week, after my diagnosis I found myself talking to God every day. Now it's once an hour. My personal relationship I hope will always be like that from now on. I want to praise Him that I am alive and function and that I'm here for my family. He's been so good to me. I want to be present and intentional to fully appreciate the gifts He has provided."



Left to Right William 7yrs, Jackie, Robert 11yrs, Serenity 4yrs, husband Raitis Sipols

PHOTO CREDIT: Lil Redds Photography

Colleen Kelly, SL5, New Castle, PA, Owner of Uncle Jimmy's: Maker of Horse Treats

I've known Colleen for about eleven years, and yet had no idea that her career path included working with physically and mentally handicapped for thirteen years. "Back then you were allowed to give them much needed hugs and to show them affection," Colleen said. "I always loved children and loved the handicapped and was sorry for so many of the changes that happened near the end of my career."

For the next ten years after that, Colleen worked as a Humane Officer in Butler County PA, working to protect animals, and investigating animal abuse. Many were hoarding cases. Nearly all animals would be removed but one or two would be allowed to remain. "Even after a case was closed, I wanted to make sure there was enough food for their animals so I would do my own follow ups. I loved and cared about the animals and the people," Colleen said.

For years after that, Colleen managed horse farms which was fun for a while. Then she met Uncle Jimmy, SM3 and learned about mounted shooting. For years they shared their love for the sport together only to have tragedy pull them apart shortly after they had gotten married. I wanted to interview Colleen because I noticed that at every mounted shooting event, Colleen attends the cowboy church services and I wanted to ask her about her faith after the tragedy.

"Sometimes I'm the only one at church, at the smaller shoots, but I like to go and hear someone speak from the heart," she told me. "I believe in God. I love Him and I trust Him." Colleen was quick to explain why she always goes. "I really enjoy church by the Penley's. With them, it's about a feeling not just scripture. It's something they have lived and feel in their hearts. When you hear something read, it's only words. With them, it's the expressions on their faces AND the words. It makes me relate."

Colleen shared with me that faith is a part of her life even though it's evolved over the years. "When I wake up, I don't read every day, but every day I talk to God, whether I'm in the barn or at my desk."

For years, Uncle Jimmy was a big part of mounted shooting for Colleen, and she admits she probably would not have gotten into it without him. "Everyone deals with loss in a different way. Some say, 'You've got to let it go.' Let go of what? My memories? My love? Every day I get up. I'm learning to run his horse, Jetta. I'm learning to run the company. I thought I had wanted less responsibility and now I have more. I have a challenge."

At the end of our interview, I asked Colleen for any words of wisdom. "If you have a dream, just go for it. Don't put it off."



Colleen Kelly

**Tammi Stover, "Volunteer Extraordinaire",
Rogersville TN, RN**

This is quite the story and Tammi tells it so beautifully. I'm fascinated by her devotion to the sport because, as she explains, "I don't shoot. I'm usually in the office. It's my husband Chris who shoots. We both love the sport, just in different ways," she said. "I like horses," she added, "and this past year we started to get into trail riding." Then her health declined. Tammi had breast cancer and a double mastectomy. I didn't know this and found myself crying because this was a crazy twist for my wanting to interview her for this article. "There is a reason why I'm going through this. But He's taken care of me. From the start of my being diagnosed, I knew I would be fine. Chris was a mess, but I'm fine."

Tammi insists this interview is about Chris, SM6 but that she tells the story better. They got into mounted shooting up north in Central Pennsylvania about nine years ago. "Chris had been into horses for years. Rodeos, barrel racing and one bull-riding episode. He's ex-military so guns weren't new to him. We saw a flier for a shoot in Centre Hall, talked to everyone there, and got the horse broke to gunfire."

Their first horse named Faith, was for their daughter for barrels, but Faith soon became Chris's horse. "She is a palomino with a 'J' on her side. We never thought much of it until one day we figured that the 'J' was for Jesus." Over the years in mounted shooting, they would attend cowboy church. It was at a little pavilion in Doswell that Chris accepted God as his Savior. He soon learned about a cowboy church near them, and they have been going ever since.

It was through the church connection that they soon found that, "God was telling us what to do." Tammi explained the story of the struggle with real estate for the church and having to find another pastor. They decided to get involved to help and Chris found himself going to Texas with a delegation to learn about a cowboy church organization. "God was opening doors," Tammi explains.

More than that, Chris was being drawn into

service and soon after, Chris began to deliver messages during cowboy church at mounted shooting events in SC, NC and OH. "Chris always has a poem that he reads and ties everything together when he speaks," Tammi explained. Just this year, Chris started ministry classes, a four-year course. "Chris wants to grow in faith. He wants to be able to preach and give messages. He feels like he needs this."

Tammi knows that there are so many good people out there and that, "God has put these people in our path to show us love." During her diagnosis and treatment, the outpouring of support was tremendous. "My hope is that there are people who are lost who need to find God and who will not go to a regular church but who will try cowboy church. My hope is that a little seed is planted to get them looking for a cowboy church in their area."

According to Tammi, "For Chris, this has been an evolution over time, not just one event. Church was the last thing on his mind. The horses were how God spoke to him."

Tammi still rides Faith who at twenty, has retired from mounted shooting. Chris has a horse named Hope as his shooting horse. Faith had a foal, named Grace. That's how they got their horses, in that order: Faith, Hope and Grace. A few days after my interview with Tammi, I asked for a few words from Chris. "God always had a plan. It all started with a horse named Faith. Then going to shoots and being led to the Lord. And all the friends who helped us to go through breast cancer. True friends. All because of mounted shooting."



Chris and Tammi Stover