

Meet Mary Amoroso - Friend of South Park

Mary is a certified Riding Instructor and Barn manager, as well as the Allegheny County Director of the Pennsylvania Equine Council. Mary is also certified by Allegheny County as a part of its Department of Minority, Women and Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Program. She is certified in Cardiac Pulmonary Resuscitation, and in 2010 successfully performed CPR on a jogger who collapsed with a heart attack on Corrigan Drive. The jogger had triple bypass surgery, but he survived.

Mary and her husband David were the original vendors at the Corrigan Drive Pony Ring in South Park, campaigning with the then three Commissioners of Allegheny County (Mike Dawida, Bob Cranmer and Larry Dunn) for over three years to finally build the ring in 1997. Mary and David successfully operated the ring for six years until another entity took over when the County's bid package was mailed to an incorrect address.

In September 2014 the American Riding Instructors Association (a nationwide organization established in 1984 to promote safe, knowledgeable riding instruction) honored Mary as its "Riding Instructor of the Month." To be certified as an instructor with ARIA, Mary successfully completed several tests, including essays, a video submission, a day-long battery of written tests, as well as as an on-the-spot oral presentation before a live panel of judges. For the oral presentation, each participant was handed a sealed envelope containing three questions, unknown to the participants. Participants were then asked to choose one question to answer and had ten minutes to prepare to speak before the panel for at least 5 to 7 minutes on the chosen subject.

The ARIA asked Mary to write a brief article about herself. That article follows:

I read every book in the library about horses, and started preparing for my first horse before I ever took a lesson. Other kids bought candy or toys with their allowance money - I'd browse horse supply catalogs and buy hoof picks, brushes, even a flat-backed bucket, for my future horse. I started trail riding at Valleybrook Stables in South Park as soon as I'd saved enough to pay my brother to drive me to the stables, since I did not have enough money for a car. There I saw several riding students working in a large, dusty arena, and I longed to be among them. I made a deal with my brother that he would drive me to my weekly riding lessons, as long as I covered his gas and expenses. It was the best trade I ever made.

My first lesson was almost my last, since I fell off into a puddle at my first attempt at trotting without stirrups. My mother said I was so covered in mud I was nearly unrecognizable, and she was absolutely amazed that I got back on and finished the lesson. That was her first realization that I would always have horses in my life. A lot of instructors I know have ridden since early childhood, but since I started riding at 17 years old, I can easily and clearly remember the confusion of how to hold the reins, figuring out how to make a 1,000 pound animal turn, and the shock of occasionally hitting the ground! So I have empathy for nervous and frightened new riders.

I continued my lessons at Valleybrook for years, participating in schooling shows at the local Schoonmaker Hall, until I purchased a horse of my own, one of the former Valleybrook lesson horses, Lady. The riding school sold Lady because no one enjoyed riding her since she could be stubborn and slow – the students' nickname for her was "Lethargic Lady." Once I started working with Lady one-on-one, however, she learned to respond happily. I still remember cantering her over a spread jump which she cleared beautifully, and the Lady's former owner shouting "how did you get her to do that so willingly?"

I met my husband, David, at Valleybrook when his mare, Star, escaped and I caught her. I didn't want to ride with David since I preferred trail riding by myself, I felt he was an amateur, and I wanted to gallop and jump! But I always stopped on the trail to let children pet my horse, so David and Star caught up to us, and my first thought was "Darn, I have to be polite and talk to him because we are at the same barn!" Turns out he wasn't so bad, both as a rider and a gentleman. Our horses were at our wedding, but Lady backed away when she saw me in a wedding gown – she had only ever seen me in jeans or breeches. Lady calmed down once she recognized my voice, enough for us to take photos, but I could tell she was relieved to get away from that big, white, fluffy horse-eating get up!

Today we have our own small pony farm where I teach children to ride and hold pony camps for eager young equestrians. My favorite part of teaching is when an uneasy rider finally relaxes and works with the pony. When a child realizes the pony is actually responding to the child's aids, kids just beam not only with pride but also with wonder that they are really communicating with the pony, and the pony becomes something more to them than just a fun ride. My ponies teach children compassion and patience, how to react quickly and calmly and take charge with firmness but always kindness. They learn to deal with frustration, without force and anger, when a pony doesn't always cooperate. Many of my students' parents have thanked me for the confidence they've seen develop in their children, as well as improvements in their posture! My ARIA certification also assures parents that their children will have an experienced and knowledgeable instructor taking care of them.

While most of my students are children, one special woman I taught will always stay in my heart. She was 70+ years old and had a life-long dream of riding a horse, but she was deathly afraid. When she arrived she was too frightened to come inside the barn. I put my husband's large Quarter pony, Star, in the crossties closest to the entrance, and while I groomed Star I talked to the women about riding as she timidly stood in the doorway, apologizing for wasting my time. I insisted any time spent with a horse, whether in the saddle or on the ground, is never a waste, and invited her to just try grooming the horse, and she stepped forward and grabbed a curry. The woman was delighted that Star so clearly enjoyed being brushed, and asked question after question about horses. After about a half hour I suggested saddling Star, and the women decided to go for it – riding a horse was on her bucket list! I got her settled in the saddle and after a few startled gasps as Star moved about, she finally relaxed and enjoyed herself. I cannot remember her name, but I'll always remember her smile. She needed some help to dismount, but as she left she told me I had given her a gift she'd never forget.

I still enjoy reading anything and everything about horses (the mysteries by Dick Francis are a favorite). When I have time (and the room) I volunteer as a foster "parent" for Italian

Greyhounds, and I work with various animal rescue groups and have helped place dogs, cats and the occasional bunny in secure, loving homes. I'm very proud of my students, many of whom have grown up to own horses themselves. It's always a shock, however, to see a smiling parent, holding a young child's hand, and have the parent ask me "Remember when you taught me? Well I'm back, and now I'd like you to teach my child!"