

To the Top of the Mountain

By Jill Blanchard 2005

My love for horses reaches back to my earliest memories. As a toddler I would ride my plastic horse for hours. I took riding lessons all through my youth. For as long as I can remember, I have dreamed of having my own horse. I would never have imagined that the dream would blossom because of a breed I had never heard of – The Rocky Mountain Horse.

Another love of mine is music. For years I directed a church choir. Jerry, one of my favorite choir members, played the bass fiddle. After a year of grieving over the death of his wife, he had joined the choir saying that it was time to “get on with living.” He brought incredible joy and spirit to the choir along with his quiet wisdom that he had collected in his 70-some years. Thus began our friendship, which has lasted twenty-five years.

Our friendship deepened when Jerry consoled me when I went through a painful divorce. He was certainly one who understood loss and was very supportive of me. It was during this time I learned that Jerry had horses. I hadn't ridden since high school. Jerry hadn't ridden much since the loss of his wife, and he invited me out to ride.

How I loved spending time on Jerry's mountain! In his younger years, Jerry had been a park ranger and had put these skills to use as he carefully carved several hiking and riding trails into his mountainside.

Among the days spent in this idyllic setting, I remember one in particular when we went riding in the spring. There was a stretch of trail that went right through a grove of mountain laurel and rhododendron. It was dream-like as we rode several yards through this grove in full bloom, surrounded by beautiful flowers on both sides and above our heads. It was unforgettable. Jerry and I had long talks on these rides. I did a lot of healing and was thrilled to be riding again. I was reminded of my dream to one day have my own horse.

The years passed, I married my wonderful husband, Dennis, had two beautiful children, Michael and Michelle, and life became busy. Even so, Jerry continued to be a part of my life. Sadly, as so often happens with the elderly, Jerry fell and broke his hip and moved into a nursing home. As long as he thought he could recover and go back to his mountain, he exercised regularly and kept his spirit strong. Unfortunately, Jerry's desire to move to his beloved home was not to be, and he resigned himself to life in a nursing home.

I also had some changes in my life, which led me to take a sabbatical from choir directing. This was a big decision for me as I had directed the choir for twenty years, and the choir had been a very large part of my life. It was during this “free” time that I met my dear friends, Terry & Lavinia Kingery, owners of BreezKrest Farm, and began riding again. Lavinia was

an excellent, patient instructor. Rocky Mountain Horses were new to me, and I loved their gentle disposition and smooth gait. Within a year she introduced me to a beautiful young gelding that she thought would be perfect for me as he was calm and very gentle. If I had any doubts about the wisdom of my new venture, they were quickly dispelled by a startling coincidence when Lavinia told me his name.

I'll never forget that clear, crisp, winter day when Lavinia, my daughter, Michelle, and I walked out to the pasture where this horse was. Lavinia explained that she had bought him as a weanling in Kentucky; he displayed no vices, had a sweet disposition, and came from good breeding lines. When I asked his name, she said, "Music, actually, Making Music". My daughter and I exchanged surprised expressions, and I felt goose bumps up and down my arms as I thought – "it's a sign – this is meant to be". And so it has been ever since.

I now have had my beautiful Music for three years; my daughter shares my love for horses and has become an excellent equestrian. We have taken Music to local and international shows and have competed successfully. Ribbons adorn the walls of my daughter's room while mine are discreetly tucked away, wanting to be displayed somewhere! We have also taken Music trail riding throughout parts of Virginia and Tennessee, and he is a great trail horse.

My husband is now a Senior Examiner for the Rocky Mountain Horse Association. My sister, Pam, and niece, Carla, have become "horse-people" too and board their Rocky Mountain horses at BreezeKrest Farm. It has become a real family affair. In the back of my mind, I always felt that I had Jerry to thank as those trail rides so many years ago helped me remember my dream of owning a horse.

Throughout this new chapter of my life, I would visit Jerry and tell him all about my adventures and show pictures to him. I tried to get him to come out to BreezKrest to meet Music. But sadly, Jerry had lost some of his spark, and I couldn't get him to leave the nursing home.

Last summer my sister and I bought a horse trailer. Soon after I thought if we couldn't get Jerry to the farm, then we would take the farm to Jerry! Along with my family, close friends from choir, Chris and Ray, were my "partners-in-crime" to get the horses to the nursing home. Chris and Ray were going to be visiting Jerry at the assigned time and would bring him out for the surprise when we were ready.

The day of the visit arrived. My sister and her horse, Missy, were also part of this adventure. Our two horses were so calm and relaxed when they got off the trailer that we decided to tack them up and show them off under saddle!

We called our friends on their cell phone to have them bring Jerry out. We waited and waited – no Jerry. I walked Music across the parking lot over to where Jerry would come out of the building. As we neared the building, I could see my friends walking on either side of Jerry as they approached the sliding glass doors. Music had never seen sliding glass doors, and as they

slid open, he raised his head up high, perked up his ears in an alert stance and froze. He looked absolutely gorgeous! Chris was pointing out to Jerry, "Look, Jerry! There's Jill and she brought her horse, Music to see you!" With that, Jerry looked hard and doubled over his walker overcome with emotion. They assisted Jerry out of the building toward the parking lot as Music and I slowly approached. I stopped a few feet away from Jerry, as I didn't want to frighten or overwhelm him. Through my tears I said, "Jerry, this is my horse, Music. I couldn't get you to come to the farm, so I brought the farm to you!" With that, as if on cue, Music slowly took a step forward and gently placed his muzzle on Jerry's hand which was resting on the walker. It was as if Music knew why he was there. Now, we all were in tears.

Some of the residents came out to see the horses or watched from their balconies. We showed off our Rockies and all the maneuvers that we had taught them. Jerry was most impressed. He had never seen a Rocky Mountain Horse and was amazed at their smooth, natural gait and how the riders didn't move in the saddle. Jerry said over and over again that this was the best day of his life, and I remembered with gratitude the many days Jerry had made special for me when I needed support.

On that day at the nursing home, our horses behaved better than we could have hoped for. They were truly amazing as they remained calm throughout the whole event and let everyone pet them. Music seemed to sense a need in Jerry, and it was plain to see the effect that these great animals have on people. That intangible, but very real connection between horse and human was clearly evident.

For a brief time, it was as though Music, my wonderful Rocky, had taken Jerry and me back to the top of the mountain.