

By Lisa Ridgeway, Washington State, and Jane Brewster, Ohio

### **Lisa's Story:**

I bought my first Rocky Mountain Horse 13 years ago. She was 2 years old, and I was in my early 40s. Like many of you who have gotten back into horses after leaving them behind with your childhood or teen years, I thought I would pick right up where I had left off some 30 years earlier. I was so ill-prepared. I'll never forget the feeling of total shock, fear, panic I felt when the horse shipper placed the lead rope in my hand for the first time, while saying, "Here's your horse ma'am!"

I honestly looked around to see who he was talking to! Where was the person that was going to take this lead rope and do something with this horse standing here? Did he mean ME? I don't think I'd envisioned horse ownership beyond the wonderful childhood memories of sunny days and bareback rides, of glossy pictures of gorgeous stallions in green pastures.....Now, here stood this little filly, Sundance's Silky, quietly munching my manicured yard, and my mind was somersaulting through panicked uncertainties. Was I really ready to own and care for a horse?

I've come a long way since then – learned all about poop patrol, fences, feeding and pasture management/rotation, barns, horse trailers, tack, natural trimming, worming schedules, bits, saddle fit, breeding, natural horsemanship, clicker training, foaling, raising babies. And through all of that, I know that some of the most important things you have to do are research, ask questions, be willing to admit you don't know, and learn, learn, learn.

I read books, bought tapes, then DVDs, attended clinics, took some lessons, joined groups and followed blogs. All the information is there for you if you look for it, but knowing who or what to believe can be a challenge and something many of us had to learn on our own through trial and error. That is why having a close relationship with your Rocky Mountain Horse Association and the tireless workers within the organization can be so important and beneficial to you, the new Rocky owner.

### **Jane's Story**

I bought my first Rocky 4 years ago. Like Lisa, I was in my early 40's and purchased a 2 year old mare. What an adventure! I had done quite a bit of research before making my decision. Especially after reading Bonnie Hodge's book "Rocky Mountain Horses", there was no question in my mind what breed I wanted. I will tell you, though, that it's a scary place to be, being a novice looking for a good horse. I visited a breeder and thought I had decided upon a mare that would work for me. Being naïve, I thought I would be given a good, honest deal by someone who raised and sold Rockies. I put a deposit on a teenage mare, who seemed sensible and kind. Having read everywhere that you don't finalize anything until you get a pre-purchase exam, I made this a requirement. Unfortunately for me, the vet indicated that the mare had severe osteoarthritis. What he didn't tell me, or even look for, was that she was also pregnant – I found that out later! Fortunately, I moved on to find a wonderful, but very young, filly named Trojan's Curly Girl. Since I live in the suburbs, I keep her at a boarding facility, along with the two other mares our family now owns.

I know much less than Lisa about taking care of horses, which has become a major concern for me. I will be moving to my own farm this coming summer and taking on the task of caring for these three mares.

## **Our thoughts on how the Association can help new horse owners**

Recently an interesting discussion came up on a Yahoo Group devoted to topics related strictly to Mountain Horses. Several people mentioned some disturbing things. They said that when they went to Equine Affaires or Shows where our various Mountain Horse breeds were represented, they didn't feel "welcomed". They said the people smiled, but didn't seem to reach out to them, engage them. Because of the individuals' own lack of confidence about horses or being new to Rockies in particular, they feel they missed opportunities to learn, meet people, or find good horses.

Lisa's professional background includes frequently representing her company at career fairs and she knows you have to be very outgoing or interested people will pass you by if you don't reach out to them. Our number one job if we are participating in any of these local or national events wherein we are representing our breed, is to be as outgoing, as welcoming as we can possibly be. Not to say that we are not doing so already, but maybe it is a good time we take stock of and see if as an organization, we can find ways wherein we can improve to set ourselves and our breed apart from the other booths.

Several of us were thinking, too, that we could set up State or Regional Mentoring Programs. Perhaps when a new person joins the Association, or we see that a registration changes hands, we could offer up a list of approved mentors in the area for the new Rocky owner to go to with questions or concerns as well as for prospective owners to contact to find out more about the breed. There have been too many of our wonderful horses harmed in the early years by inexperienced, but well-meaning, horse owners – overfeeding/founder, riding too young, looking for gait the wrong way, ill-fitting tack, etc. A properly run volunteer mentorship program could better serve the people and the horses and the final advantage could be to offset the poor information that is out there about our breed, our horses, our Association, and our politics within the Association. It would also serve to help new owners get over the "newbie jitters", build confident relationships with their horses, and to feel a strong connection to our Association.

## **Moving Forward**

Jane – I can envision an association that would reach out to the new horse owner having no experience owning or taking care of horses. How inviting would it be to have a place to go where you didn't have to feel awkward for not knowing, where a resource would exist through a simple phone call or an email? I venture to guess there are plenty of others out there, perhaps similar to Lisa and me, who would be interested in owning a wonderful Rocky, but have no idea how to go about it, or are worried that they would have no support system.

Jane Brewster

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Lisa - I would like to put my money where my mouth is and participate in future outreach events as I can, so call on me, and I know of others within our breed in different parts of the country who feel this way too. I would also like to form a Washington State RMHA Chapter. We had one several years ago and it unfortunately died on the vine – time to re-grow it!

Contact me if you would like to discuss Rockies, would like resources for assistance, or are interested in a Washington State RMHA Chapter.

Lisa Ridgeway

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Lisa Ridgeway and her small herd live in Vashon, Washington



Jane Brewster and Trojan's Curly Girl. Jane and Curly Girl live in Ohio