

CELEBRATING 10 YRS!

WINTER 2021/2022

GRINS, GRIT & GRACE

Stories From Stable Days Youth Ranch

10 YEARS STRONG! AND 23 YEARS OLD!

By Caryl Lester

It's hard to believe that Stable Days has been serving the Red River Valley community for 10 years!

Thank you dear friends for the prayers and support through all the joys and through all the growing pains.

We remain in awe of the blessed provisions that God continues to allow us to receive. Even this week when finances were looking down, we were lifted up by an unexpected gift and a message of prayers being prayed over this place.

When we started down this road in 2011 I wrote a short story I titled Humble Beginnings, not a terribly original name but fitting for our story.

Some of you may know that our daughter Andrea (Andi) was the inspiration behind Stable Days and as we celebrate 10 years of ministry we also celebrate her 23rd birthday.

Our little Andi is all grown up now and has just recently moved down to the Twin Cities area to start a new chapter. Her story will always bring us joy. And tears. So a special thanks to Andi and to our Lord who loves her fiercely!

In honor of Andi and our beginnings here is...

Humble Beginnings Part 1: Andi's Story...

"Is today a stable day?" Andrea (Andi) would ask. Ben and I would smile and be glad on the days that we could say yes.

A stable day, for Andi, was a day filled with feeding, caring for, riding, and cleaning up after horses.

Andi grew up navigating life with severe learning and emotional disabilities, struggling with multiple mental health diagnoses along with some significant medication side effects.

She is our niece and her life story began with an all too common tale of neglect and abuse going back well before she took her first breath.

Speed, meth, pot, cigarettes, and alcohol, worked against Andi's forming body, destroying all hope of a healthy "normal" life.

Andi's mom had many run ins with social services and Andi's maternal brother and sister had been removed from her mom's care just prior to her meeting and marrying my brother.

Having been reported for neglect, again, and concerned that she may lose her baby, Andi's mom decided that a change of scenery



ANDI'S FIRST RIDING LESSON

was in order.

Andi was 7 months old when her mom and dad packed up most of what they had into a small travel trailer and headed east to a faith-based recovery center in Florida.

Andi's dad had heard of this place and had been trying to convince his wife that this was a place where healing happens.

Now she was on board with this idea, so they stacked all their dreams into the possibility that within this venture they could find help, rewrite their life stories and find peace to their family.

Shortly after leaving Spokane they crossed the border into Idaho

TURN! TURN! TURN! -

To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven.

and stopped in Coeur d'Alene. With the late start they'd gotten and a crabby baby to care for, they decided to set up camp and called it a day.

At some point that night, Andi's mom woke up, sleepy but unable to sleep she was hungry so she quietly moved to the kitchen, to make herself some bacon.

With the bacon nearly done she turned to grab a plate, as she struggled to maneuver in the tight space of the trailer, she bumped the handle of the frying pan.

Burning grease spilled down the front of both her exposed legs. Screaming silently as to not wake her husband or their sleeping baby, she slipped out of the trailer and walked herself to a nearby hospital.

The intake nurse asked Andi's mom question after question, quickly revealing her bipolar and schizophrenia diagnoses and her recent stay in a recovery unit.

Even in excruciating pain, Andi's mom had an insatiable need for attention and a knack for creating chaos. She stirred up a story convincing the nurses that her baby girl was in danger and her husband was unfit and not safe to parent.

After demanding that someone bring Andi to the hospital, the police were called in and tasked with an infant welfare check. The police arrived at the trailer and assuming that Andi's mom's stories were true. They stepped in with accusations regarding Andi's care.

Despite Andi's dad's claims that he was of sound mind and more than able to care for his daughter, Andi was swiftly taken away and brought to the hospital before being placed in a temporary foster home.

The next day she was transferred back to her home state of Washington, where Child Services found her what they thought was a safe and appropriate placement.

A week or so later, Child Services discovered that her care was once again lacking. An unannounced visit found Andi un-kept and un-cared for. Matted hair, formula stained clothes, an unchanged diaper, and a moldy formula bottle forced her social worker to remove her immediately and seek other arrangements.

With no other infant beds available, Andi was transferred from Spokane to Vancouver where her paternal grandparents were able to temporarily step in and give her the love and care that every infant deserves.

A few weeks later Andi's parents sat in a Spokane courthouse waiting with sad hearts to hear the official news.

The state appointed Guardian Ad Litem announced their recommendation to strip Andi's mother of all parental rights. Because of many things, most not included in this story, the plan was to draft and enforce a restraining order that would separate Andi from any harm or influence her mother could have over her in future years.

Andi's dad had to make the impossible choice between caring for his wife or caring for his child. His faith drew him to stay with his wife and help her change, help her recover., help her become stable and then show the state what a good mom she could be. It was his

only hope of becoming a family again.

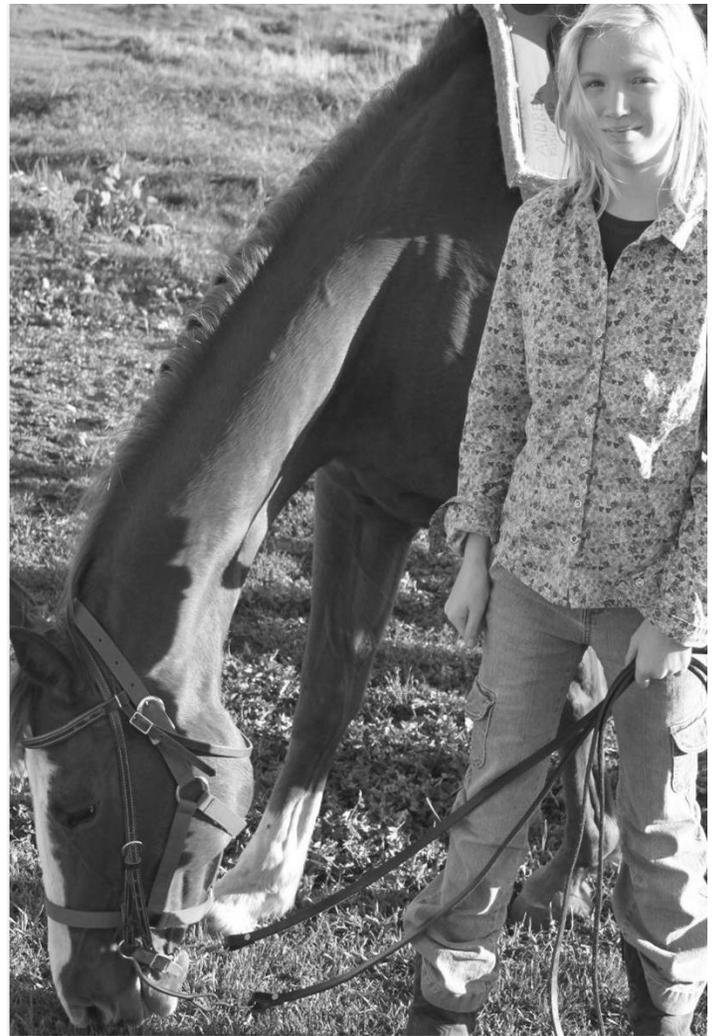
Andi was 9 months of age when I met her for the first time. Washington Social Services had awarded Ben and I a non-parental custodial agreement and flew me out to Vancouver.

I had only two days to introduce myself to Andi and then I would be flying her to Iowa to meet her new family.

Once the dust had settled on the court proceedings Andi's mom and dad packed up once again and were off to Florida with the prayerful hope of a healing miracle.

As Andi was settling in to her new home in Iowa, her mom and dad were not settling in to their plans in Florida. Worse became worse and Andi's mom was arrested for the attempted murder of Andi's dad.

Andi's first and second year were full of challenging behaviors but shortly after her third birthday her behaviors elevated from



ANDI & FRIEDA MAE NOVEMBER OF 2011

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challenging to concerning and at the tender age of 4 she experienced her first mental health related hospitalization.

Andi's dad kept in touch and visited her as he was able to. When Andi was 5, she was able to move back in with her dad, her psychiatrist advised us to have Andi reunited with her dad, in hopes that the behaviors that were thought to be caused by her Reactive Attachment diagnosis (one of many diagnoses) would soften.

Unfortunately her behaviors continue to get worse and with in the year Andi was admitted to a child behavior center, where she was known as the youngest child to ever destroy a safe room.

Post discharge, she moved back in with us for a time before trying again to settle in again at her dad's home.

Once again Andi's behaviors went from bad to worse, and my brother was not equipped to parent her so it was determined that she would be permanently moved back in with us.

Her early diagnoses and interventions seemed to make little difference in her behaviors. Her school records verified the need for physical restraining several times a day to keep her and others out of harm's way.

At this point in her life Andi had the support of her dad and his new wife, her Uncle and Aunt, that she knows as mom and dad, her psychiatrist, her psychologist, her therapist, her social workers, her teachers, her paras, her trackers, her pastors, her church and her brothers and sisters. All of us working to help her gain ground for peace and normalcy, but her behavior and ability to cope in this world were not improving.

While preparing for Andi's return, I contacted the school where she would be attending and after records were transferred I met with the group that would be Andi's new "wrap" team. The school requested we keep her home until a para could be hired, trained and brought up to speed on Andi's care.

It was during this time that Andi's Papa and Nana decided to give her a special gift. It was a gift that would end up changing her life, and changing our family in a most surprising and extraordinary way.

On November 28th, 2010, Andi was given a riding lesson.

Her first lesson was with an old, but not too tired, grey gelding. Andi's mind settled in a way that we had never seen before as she rode this horse with a calm confidence. Before leaving the stables that day, Ben and I signed Andi up for two more weeks of lessons and by the third week, convinced that Andi needed to live in a barn, we leased Freida Mae, a 27 year old mare with asthma.

Andi's metamorphosis began immediately. She had, to our amazement, very little need for correction when out at the stables. Andi was not only developing as a ranch hand and a rider, but she was being changed by the power of God and by her relationship with a horse.

We witnessed first hand her willingness to complete a task. Her desire to care for and learn more about horses increased with each visit. She wanted to clean buckets, clean hooves and clean stalls, often asking if she could do even more. "Can I please stay longer and clean up poop today?" This is an actual quote, and for us it was simply amazing.

Andi began to improve in her thought processing, comprehension and cooperation. We were thrilled to see this changed behavior begin to linger well after the riding lessons had ended.

It wasn't long before her success at the stables began to positively impact her time at home and at school.

Three months after leasing Freida Mae, Andi progressed out of an isolated setting for emotionally disabled children and was spending much of her school day in a 'regular' class room with para support. As a 5th grader and for the first time in her school career she had overcome her explosive behaviors enough to have academics introduced to her IEP (Individual education plan).

Did you catch that! She was being taught academics and not just behavior modification!

Part 2: Equipping the called

Ben, Andi and I dove headfirst into the world of horses. Four months after Andi's first riding lesson we went from leasing to being horse owners.

We bought Ruby, a sweet little dun mare at a local boarding facility and kept her there; surrounded by the support we needed to be successful first time horse owners.

During one of our many visits to MonteRay Stables, the owner asks if I would help her out with a middle school field trip.

Assuming I would be in charge of sack lunches and bathroom breaks, I agreed. Horses were still a new to me and I had yet to actually spend much time with one.

Arriving early at the ranch I met with the team of volunteers that had been recruited for the day's activities.

Krista, the ranch owner, handed out assignments and then it was my turn. Glancing up at me she said, "Caryl, you're going to be in here in the arena with me, leading Levi."

"Oh no!" I replied, "No, that is not a good idea."

Krista smiled, "You'll be fine, I'll be in the center of the arena and all I need you to do is stay beside Levi and his riders, help them mount and dismount and listen to my directions."

The kids arrived and while they were divided up into three groups to travel through the three stations.

I took a deep breath and said little prayer, begging for courage.

My first rider was a young boy who was truly more afraid than I was. His body shook as I helped him mount. You could see his legs tremble even after he settled into the saddle. He smelled of stale urine and wore a sad vacant gaze.

After several laps around the arena at a walk, my rider was starting to relax. He loosened his grip on the saddle horn and sat back in his seat, just ever so slightly.



ANDI AND RUBY

EPHESIANS 2:10

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The other riders had moved up to a trot. I asked my rider, "Do you want to trot?" His grip and his face tightened and with no words spoken he clearly told me "NO!".

A few steps more and a horse trotted by us. Levi, apparently bored with the slower pace, decided it was time to trot and to my surprise he did, with me trailing behind. I jogged quickly to catch up with him and with a simple "WALK" yelled by Krista, he slowed back down.

When I looked up into the eyes of my rider, my gaze was met with a nervous little smile, not the fear or tears I was expecting.

That was exciting." I laughed, "Should we do that again, on purpose?"

He gave me a slight little nod and I took Levi's lead and stated to jog, Levi took the cue and jogged beside me.

That's when it happened. My riders face exploded with a smile too true and huge to hide and it was paired with the most amazing giggle. It's a giggle that seems to happen anytime a child trots on a horse they have learned to trust. My kiddo was so proud of himself, so two of us took a moment to bask in his special victory.

It was time to switch stations and before the end of the day I would walk beside Levi, serving two other kiddos, both like my first rider, in need of a bit of encouraging and some respite through adventure.

After the kids said their goodbyes and loaded up for their bus trip home, the volunteers sat for a rest. Krista let out a sigh, "It's a lot of work but it's worth it, don't you think? Most of these kids would never get a chance to ride, and it's so good for them." We all agreed.

On my way home from the ranch I thought about my first rider,. You could tell that his life was not easy. Not even one of the other kids spoke with him or stood next to him. He was small in frame, spoke with simple words, and it appeared that small tasks too often became big struggles.

I remembered his smile while he trotted on the back of Levi, the kind of smile you can't hide no matter how hard you try. Tears started flowing down my cheeks as the weight of the impact of the day became clear. How blessed I was to be a part of this boy's moment of courage, pure joy and brief respite.

My thoughts jumped back to Andi and how her life was continuing to be transformed by God through the nature of a horse.

A picture was developing in my mind.

I pulled off the highway and said a prayer for the kids I had just served, asking God to protect and defend them and to keep the memory of today safe in their hearts, always ready to remind them of their courage.

A few more deep breaths and with my tears under control, I called Ben. "Hey, I'm on my way home. What an amazing day." I took a long pause to keep the tears at bay and said with a large dose of hesitancy, "I think we're supposed to start a youth ranch."

"Okay," Ben's replied. "Let's do it!" (For those of you who don't

know Ben this was genuine not flippant or sarcastic.)

I thank God for the way my heart was stirred, the way my mind was challenged and the way God used me that day.

A simple time of walking beside a child and a horse changed me and began the process of equipping me for God's emerging plan.

Piece by piece the details for the ranch came together. God, being ever-faithful, showed us time after time that this direction was right and that his plan for the ranch was good.

Starting 'without a pot to pee in' as my grandpa used to say, it wasn't long before we had a board of directors, a support team, a volunteer team, experienced horse handlers and Gem and Taz, our first two program horses.

We opened the ranch for one-on-one youth mentoring sessions just 7 months after Andi's first lesson. The need was great and the kiddos came, filling every mentoring spot we could open.

We continue on today, welcoming all kids, regardless of their history, diagnosis, social or financial standings, at no cost to their families, to experience the ranch and all it has to offer; to meet our amazing staff and our extraordinary horses, and take hold of every opportunity to lean into their potential and do the good works they were created to do.

Shortly before her 14th birthday, Andi was interviewed by a local news program and when asked what she thought about horses she replied with a sweet smile, "Horses, well they changed my life actually.

You can find this newsclip by searching Stable Days Youth Ranch—You Tube.

This is our story, with humble beginnings and growing faith, Ben and I are the founders of Stable Days Youth Ranch, a place for mentoring kids and caring for horses

God is our provider and Andi will always be our inspiration.



ANDI, THE GIRL BEHIND THE RANCH!

RALPH WALDO EMERSON -

“TO BE YOURSELF IN A WORLD THAT IS CONSTANTLY TRYING TO MAKE YOU SOMETHING ELSE IS THE GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT.”

DANCING WITH THUNDER

By Caryl Lester

October of 2020 I started studying the principles of Natural Lifemanship. The lessons are simple but far from easy. It is profoundly nuanced and requires moment by moment reflective consideration. In other words it requires work, ongoing and purposeful personal effort!

The first principle: *"Relationship is the vehicle for change."*

Change comes through our relationships. Our relationship with God, with ourselves and others. And as significant as this truth is the powerful balancing thought is that relationships can't thrive, nor do they tolerate our desire for perfection. Perfection is a goal we can't reach and expecting perfection blocks connection and leaves no room for grace or growth.

March of 2021 found me in a pleasant part of Texas known as Tyson's Corner. It was there that I was to complete the practical work, the face to face training required for this course.

The "final exam" begins with what is referred to as the dance of connection. Moving in and out of attachment (close up) and detachment (further away) while centering on the goal of attunement. My partner, a horse.

The task was to ask a horse to notice me, and then we would work through a series of connection exercises to begin building a relationship based on connection not control or compliance.

The challenge was I needed to do this while being authentic, present, open, never forcing a response and never taking away the horses choice to resist or ignore me.

Connection can be tricky to find. In horses or humans it can be easily disguised as compliance and when compliance is accepted as the foundation in the relationship, connection is hijacked. It's like doing the right thing but with the wrong inner sense.

The pasture was large and the instructions were wide. "Pick any horse, any one that you feel drawn to.

With 22 horses to consider, I wondered what my criteria should be. After meeting most of the herd, it came down to the moustache.

Thunder, a palomino paint gelding with a stache to be proud of, was sunning next to a round bale of hay, his little mini herd of yearlings near by.

He was nicknamed Uncle Thunder for his kindhearted care for the young ones in the herd.

I approached him with my forefinger curved over my top lip. My inner child chuckled as I thought, "Hello friend, I *moustache* you a question" a quip I knew my grown children and grandchildren would have found amusing.

I asked him to stand up and consider my presence. He obliged and the dance began.



THUNDER - TYSONS CORNER

With connection in mind I asked him to move a bit so that I could halter him with the space needed for him to maintain his right to choose to cooperate... or not.

Thunder moved towards me and dipped his nose into the halter as if to say, "Yeah, I'll be your huckleberry!"

The walk from the pasture to the round pen was long, but it was nice and a felt sense of connection was already emerging.

Once in the round pen it was my turn to demonstrate what I had learned throughout the prior eight weeks of course work. It was time for me to make a deeper request. It was time to ask for connected attachment.

Under the watching eyes of Bettina, the co-founder of Natural Lifemanship and the author of the curriculum I was studying, stage fright silently crept in and before I knew it My heart was pounding and feelings of insecurity, thoughts of rejection, and worries of failure rushed in.

Pushing through my fears, I walked up to Thunder and under my breath whispered "Let's do this friend.

I removed Thunder's halter so he could stand free of any coercion and I began to focus attention on the hind end of the horse and with as little pressure as needed ask him to turn and move toward me. Instead of the cooperation he gifted me with in the pasture now in the round pen I got nothing. Not a glance, not an ear tipped towards me, just nothing.

I felt a pinch of failure in feeling that I had so quickly lost our beautiful beginning.

Pushing in I began to make my presence more obvious, trying even harder to get a response from Thunder. I was waving my hands, stomping my feet, making louder and louder the well known horseman's clicking and smooching noises.

Thunder, now half asleep just stood there with no appreciation for my efforts.

GETTING INVOLVED- The youth mentoring programs at Stable Days are free of charge, allowing families to participate without financial concern. But while our program is free our costs are high. If you would like to join the team through giving please use the enclosed form or visit our website at www.stabledays.org

But this were things got interesting.

Bettina stopped me , she encouraged me to take moment, take a few deep breaths and remember that it's not about the task of getting him to turn to me it's about building our relationship.

With the recognized gift of a mulligan from Thunder and a knowing and patient smile from Bettina, I took a few more breaths and with focus on connection instead of performance, I tried again.

This time when I focused on his hind quarters, Thunder turned right away and just like our introduction in the pasture a few minutes before, he took notice of me, approaching me and held no grudge for the previous failed try.

We walked together for a while attending to the connection through attachment and challenging the connection through some detachment which simply means staying attuned while creating more physical distance.

Through all the missed attempts and the successful attempts at connection what I did stayed exactly the same. My body position was the same, my focus on his hind-end for attachment and his core for detachment was the same, even my arms and voice where the same.

More than what I did, It was the deeper HOW I was that made difference.

When I was calm, regulated, and wanting connection for both of us it happened. When I was focused on me and my agenda our connection was lost.

Golden moments with the golden boy gave me a new appreciation for the value of authenticity. He heard me and cared to listen. I



2012—BEN & TAZ WITH ONE OF OUR KIDDOS

heard him and he knew that I cared . We both gifted each other with our presence and our consideration.

Like me Thunder was created to connect. We were both made to be a part of the flow of moments, leaning into the sway of the rhythm outlined by our creator.

It occurred to me in these moments of just being in relationship with Thunder, how God pursues us. He ask for our attention always giving us the option to ignore or resist. He's not looking for compliance but for connection. He's pursuing us so he can pour out his love and his grace but never demands that we accept it.

Learning the art of attunement creates a foundation for a closeness that is missing when compliance or control is settled for.

We can do most things in or out of rhythm and with or without connection but when we choose the wiser there is a greater joy, a deeper peace, and a beautiful, depth that is added .

SAYING GOODBYE



DAKOTA REST IN PEACE, WE LOVE YOU!

Don't cry for the horses that life has set free. A million white horses forever to be. Don't cry for the horses now in God's hand. As they dance and they prance in a heavenly band. They were ours as a gift, but never to keep. As they close their eyes forever to sleep.

Their spirits unbound. On silver wings they fly. A million white horses against the blue sky. Look up into heaven, you'll see them above. The horses we lost, the horses we loved.

Brenda Riley-Seymore

WINNIE THE POOH -

“HOW LUCKY I AM TO HAVE KNOWN SOMEONE THAT MAKES SAYING GOODBYE SO HARD”

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Stable Days offers an inclusive program that allows ALL KIDS, ages 5 - 17, including those who are healthy, those considered disadvantaged or disabled, or those who are labeled at-risk to experience the many benefits of adventure and equine based mentoring. If you are interested in learning more about Stable Days contact us or visit our website at www.stabledays.org.

We would love the opportunity to serve you!

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