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Horses' best friend

Chemung woman has learned lessons in life from equine friends.
March 21, 2008

STORYCHAT: Post Comment



Jim Pfiffer

At 5:30 this morning Pat Ross will be in her barn feeding, watering and brushing the 10 horses she owns, trains, breeds and loves.



JENNIFER KINGSLEY/Star-Gazette

Pat Ross brushes Tank, her 25-year-old Morgan horse, in the stable at Foxwin Farm. Today is Ross' 70th birthday, and she says she'll spend the day with her horses.

She'll spend most of the day tending to chores -- put the horses out to pasture, clean the barn, do odd jobs, make repairs and, maybe, give a few riding lessons. By late afternoon, she will return the horses to the barn and feed them again. It's heavy and tiring work, but it keeps Pat in shape.

Come nightfall, Pat will do paperwork and put in the computer time that goes along with running the 90-acre Foxwin Farm on Wilawana Road in the town of Chemung. Maybe, before she goes to bed at 9 tonight she'll remember that today isn't just another day. It's her 70th birthday.

Saturday morning, Pat will get up at 5 and do it all again. She's been doing it all for 38 years. She loves it. That's because Pat has had a special kinship with horses since she was knee-high to a foal.

"This isn't a job to me," says Pat as she brushes her 25-year-old Morgan horse, Tank, in the century-old wooden barn. Tank appears to be in heaven, his eyes nearly closed in brushing pleasure. "I get up each morning and look forward to my day. It's fun."

It's also a life lesson. Working with horses has taught Pat plenty about herself, people and human nature.

"There's not a lot of difference

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Foxwin Farm

•Where: 2418 Wilawana Road, town of Chemung.

•What: Morgan horse farm offers dressage riding lessons, horse boarding and breeding.

•Owners: Pat Ross and Ethel Fors.

between people and horses," she says. "Most horses, like people, are basically decent. You just have to figure them out -- how to work with them and get the best out of them.

"With horses, there's always a few bad apples, just like there is always a few bad people."

That's called horse sense. Pat has been developing it since she first fell in love with horses growing up in Mount Vernon north of New York City.

"I loved watching the police horses and the horses pulling the Freihofer's Bakery wagon through my neighborhood," says Pat, whose father died when she was 3. "I rode my first horse when I was 5 and ponies before that."

At age 12, Pat was sneaking through a hole in a fence at nearby Yonkers horse racing track, before and after school and on weekends. She cleaned stables without pay just to be around horses.

About a year later, she worked at a stable in White Plains. Her pay: She was allowed to ride some of the horses. She didn't have money for lessons, so she taught herself to ride. She eventually saved enough money to buy an old thoroughbred mare. She took her first riding lesson when she was 18.

But when she was 15, Pat and her mom and her younger sister moved to a small dairy farm in Chenango County that Pat's aunt bought. It had no electricity, running water or telephone.

It did have horses, and that's all that mattered to Pat. For her, the fragrance of horse manure is aromatherapy. She knew horses were going to be her life.

That's why in 1973 she teamed up with 4-H friends, David and Ethel Fors, and bought a horse farm in Norwich. In 1984, the trio bought Foxwin Farm. Today the farm offers riding lessons, boards and breeds horses and fills Pat's life with happiness and purpose.

Her experience with horses gives Pat patience and calmness in the midst of turmoil.

"She's the calmest person I know," says her friend, Trish Pierce of Corning. "If I'm on a plane and the pilot says, 'We're going down,' I want Pat next to me because she'll say, 'We'll be fine. We'll handle this.' Nothing fazes her."

That peace comes from Pat's ability to use her time with horses as therapy from life's stress and noise.

"Working with horses is a respite from the rest of the world," says Pat, who is warmly dressed in a knit cap, winter coat over a fleece jacket, jeans and rubber barn boots. "When you come through the gate, you leave everything else outside -- your troubles and worries."

•More information: (607) 529-3455 or www.foxwinfarmllc.com



JENNIFER KINGSLEY/Star-Gazette

Pat Ross fell in love with horses as a child and used to sneak into a horse race track just to be around the animals.

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Working with horses forces Pat to focus and remain in the moment and to better understand people.

"In some ways horses are more honest than people," Pat says. "Horses aren't deceitful. A dishonest person will pretend to be your best friend, but if a horse doesn't like you or trust you, they don't pretend to. They haven't learned how to be deceitful.

"Horses are in the moment," she adds. "When you're working with them, you know if they are having a good day or a bad day."

Her ability to decipher a horse's mood by the animal's body language -- ears back means anger -- helps her better read people's body language and nonverbal cues.

She's learned that there's more than one way to deal with a horse and a person.

"Sometimes a person you may not get along with just needs to be approached differently to make the relationship work," Pat explains. "Same goes for a (riding) student who just isn't getting it; you need to try another approach."

Pat says horses have made her a better person -- more compassionate and understanding.

The animals also help her deal with life's sadness.

Two of her horses died, in June and July, from disease. In August her partner and dear friend, Dave Fors, died of cancer.

She grieved and cried and gained a better acceptance of her own mortality. She worked through the pain. That's what you do when you raise horses. They have to be fed, watered and let out to pasture every day.

That's the other lesson she learned from her equine charges. Life goes on and so too will 70-year-old Pat Ross.

"My philosophy is to never stop learning and never stop enjoying the journey," she says.

That's a horse sense lesson for us all.

Thank you Pat and happy birthday.

Giddyup.

Jim Pfiffer's Real Life column about people, places and life in the Twin Tiers appears Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Contact him at (607) 271-8277 or jpffiffer@stargazette.com.

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Not too long ago, a friend of mine and I were reminiscing about when we had horses and how great of an animal they are.
The most beautiful animal, in my opinion, God has created.

Pat, I am glad you were able to live out your dream and raise horses.
"Enjoying the journey", I couldn't have said it better.
Happy Birthday Pat!

Great article.

Posted by: **Kim** on Fri Mar 21, 2008 9:16 am

Jim, finally!!! A good piece for a change! Fantastic. I don't know Pat but Happy Birthday and keep up the good work! My wife and I own one of the big horse farms (40 horses +/-) here in the E-C area and I can attest personally to the inherent truths about the work, the horses and the people. And I'll take the horses over the people any day!

Posted by: **Drew Lobo** on Fri Mar 21, 2008 8:39 am

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