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Erin Reid

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By James Mulcahy

Perhaps her abbreviated pursuit of a psychology minor at Purdue University offered the insight she needed into her own psyche. Despite conventional thinking, Erin Reid gave up her studies and switched rides.

"After two years I thought, I really want to do horses for a living," Reid said. "I'm not advocating that people leave college, but I am advocating that people follow their dreams. I left with the full intention that I would go back, but we all know the statistics on that."

Reid, a lover of horses and pretty much all other four-legged creatures, now operates a successful riding school in eastern Shelby County.

At RHC Riding Academy, students -- mostly young -- learn not just how to ride for pleasure or show, but also how to respect horses and care for them.

Because of her father's job, Reid's family moved around a lot and she sometimes found it difficult to adapt. The Canada native came to Shelby County in the early 90s via Connecticut and then California, and the Kentucky lifestyle was a "major culture shock" for this high school student.

"The first Beverly Hills 90210 (episodes) came out, and that's what everyone expected I was," she said. "It was very weird for me. The one place I felt like I belonged was at a horse show."

When in college, Reid decided to leave Purdue and start a training center in Pennsylvania, partnering for three years with her then-fiance. Reid's wedding plans didn't quite work out, and she regrouped -- a new business with a new name.

"I didn't know what to call it. I wanted to honor the history of my family, but I wanted it to be something of myself. I wanted to do my own thing."

Thus began RHC (Reid Horse Company) Riding Academy.

In September 2005, she moved the business to Shelby County, where she had attended high school and where her mom, the former Debra Wheeler, grew up. Her mother is also her business partner. "We're like roomies," she said of her mother. "We're good friends, we're roomies and we're business partners."

Twelve horses -- mostly Arabian -- fill the 15 stalls RHC Riding Academy.

"(Most) belong to me, my sister and my mom," Reid said. "We don't keep track of who is whose -- they're family horses." Reid's sister, Hyun Gardner, who was adopted into the family, helps at the academy two days a week. She also works at horse shows, coaches and shows horses herself.

Reid is a regular columnist for Shelby County Life, writing about her experiences with horses. She majored in communications at Purdue, and minored in psychology and Spanish.

She "caught the horse bug" at age 5, and began riding while living in Connecticut. "When I was little and played Barbies, they were always on horses," she said. "I never played dolls without the dolls riding, and the dolls weren't my babies, they were my students." Now her students are her children.

"I love kids," she said. But much like a grandparent, "I like the kind that come, I teach them, they go home. Those are the perfect kids. I don't want to do the diaper thing, or the birds-and-bees talk. I have my own babies, and they all have four legs. It's untraditional, I know. All of my friends are married and have kids. I'll be 32 in August, but I feel like I must have a chip missing in my brain because I don't feel like I want to be married or have kids. I don't have that biological clock; I have horses."

In early 2000, Reid's world nearly collapsed when mononucleosis triggered multiple sclerosis. For the girl who so loved horses, the thought of spending the rest of her life in a wheelchair was terrifying. "Being the horse trainer and horse lover that I am, it was almost a death sentence when I first heard it," she said. "I'm not afraid of dying, because I'm Christian; I know where I'm going. I was afraid of not being able to ride."

After the initial shock, Reid again regrouped. "I thought, 'I have a choice. Am I going to just lie down in bed?' A doctor told me I'd better stop riding because that was going to hurt. I fired him. I said I was going to fight."

"Then, every day was a struggle," she said. "Just to get out of bed every day hurt. It hurt just to be awake. Tingling -- it's like needles and pins, but imagine those needles and pins are on fire. I was legally blind. I was riding and couldn't see, and people would ask how I did it. I just said, 'Well, the horses can see.' I kept fighting. If something was weak, I'd exercise it. I even started exercising my eyes. I'm not just going to sit here and let this thing take me."

Reid's MS is relapsing/remitting, which, she said with an "ahem," is the "best kind you can have, if that exists. You're not progressively getting worse. It comes and goes, and you never know when or how it's coming back." For years, she hid it. "Nobody could tell for a long time. I didn't want people to judge me about it. I wanted them to judge me on my knowledge of horses." She still sometimes won't tell new clients right away for fear of being judged.

She recently found a new treatment through a neurologist that worked with her chiropractor, Dr. Eric Ribenboim, and "I've been in remission since. I have this thing, but it doesn't have me," she said.

Ironically, Reid believes the multiple sclerosis has made her a better trainer and riding instructor. "When I first had my symptoms in early 2000, they were debilitating and I couldn't ride for at least eight months," she said. "When I finally was able to ride again, my body felt different and it was kind of like learning all over again. I think that experience helped me be a better teacher to my students."

"I never believed that the way to train was to physically bully the horses into doing what I wanted. But there are times when a trainer has to be physically strong to teach a horse something. I didn't have that for a long time, but I was still training horses. I still am not as strong as most trainers who don't have MS are. This 'limitation' has actually become an asset to me. I train the horses' minds. You have to do that with Arabian anyway, but this took it to a whole other level. Having MS has made me a better instructor and trainer because I use my mind for everything. I think the horses appreciate it and I have gotten better results."

Reid believes her career choice was no accident.

"I really feel that every person was put on this Earth for a purpose --mine is to be a steward for these creatures God has blessed us with," she said. "Part of that stewardship is helping other people appreciate these horses." And she doesn't take her work for granted.

"Isn't it so awesome that I'm doing what I dreamed?" she asked. "I actually did become what I always dreamed I would. Not a day goes by that I don't think of how lucky I am. Not everybody has that opportunity."