

THE STORY OF ARIANA AND CHEYENNE—TWO SPIRITS BOUND BY A LOVING, TRUSTING CONNECTION

“SEEING WITH HER” heart

BY DUTCH HENRY PHOTOS BY JULIA KEESLER



Cheyenne—or “Chy” as she prefers to be called—is a nine-year-old paint Quarter Horse mare who loves to trail ride, jump, run poles and barrels and strut her stuff at fun shows. She’s an all-around great horse who since she was two always took care of her person, Ariana Tomaselli, who was a young girl of 12 when they met. The relationship between Chy and Ariana is a bit different from most horse-and-girl partnerships—since Chy was three, she’s been completely blind.



"Chy trying to steal the carrots out of my mouth. I was eating her carrots and she knew it and tried to take them from me."

Ariana met Chy eight years ago when a friend invited her to go along to pick up her new yearling filly. The two girls played with Chy for a while, then decided to load up and take the playful filly home. But Chy, who had been so co-operative all afternoon, would not step into the trailer. After trying over and over, Ariana, acting on a hunch, carefully covered Chy's head with her jacket and led the filly quietly into the trailer. Even though Chy was her friend's horse, Ariana felt the first tug at her heart for Chy that would signal the beginning of a journey of their two spirits bound together by a powerful loving connection.

Ariana had no horses of her own, but Chy's new home at a lovely boarding barn was only moments from her own house, and for the next six months her mother always knew where to find her—at the farm playing with Chy. In fact she spent more time with Chy than her owner did, and the bond between them grew and strengthened. They always seemed to know what the other was thinking. Together they frolicked, sometimes even getting into trouble.

SOMETHING WAS VERY WRONG

When Chy was just over two years old, she began to show signs that something was very wrong. She would stumble and act uncoordinated. The veterinarian was summoned and Chy was diagnosed with Equine Recurrent Uveitis (ERU), sometimes called moonblindness. Even though treatment was started right away, the left eye could not be saved, and the veterinarian worried for the right eye. Ariana's friend decided she would find a rescue that would accept Chy.

The bond between Chy and Ariana continued to grow stronger every day, and Ariana prayed she would never lose her friend. The threat of Chy going to a faraway rescue hung heavy over both of them. Would anyone care as deeply for Chy at a rescue? What would her future hold? But while they had each other, they made the most of every

continued next page

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"You can kind of see the deformation of her eye. They are slowly sinking in."

“It started as any ordinary Christmas a few months later, but it was about to prove to be a Christmas that changed Ariana’s life, and saved another. After Ariana opened all her presents, her mother handed her a small, beautifully wrapped box. Inside was a letter from Chy, written by Ariana’s older sister. ‘I belong to you now and together we will run the fields and trails forever. Love, Chy.’”

“I have no words for this mare. She is the love of my life.”



moment. Ariana spent countless hours brushing and fussing over Chy, hiding her tears in her thick mane. Ariana and Chy’s love for each other continued to grow, and Ariana dreamed of ways to keep her at the farm so they could stay together forever. She was convinced that must happen when one day Chy’s owner decided to ride her in the ring. For whatever reason, Chy promptly deposited her in the dust. No one tried to ride her after that, though Ariana wanted to. She knew Chy would never do anything to hurt her.

Finally, she convinced her mother to let her ride Chy. She slipped on the mare’s back bare-back, a little worried but happily confident too, for she knew Chy would never harm her. As her mother led them through the pasture, Chy was a perfect gentlewoman. The feeling of togetherness between young

girl and horse was forged even tighter that day. Ariana insisted her mother take her to visit Chy every day after that. In less than a week Chy was walking, trotting and even cantering under saddle. In a few more weeks they jumped their first fence together. This is even more incredible when you realize Ariana had only ever had a few riding lessons. Ariana said, “We just figured it out together.” But the fear of loss was still there, as the search was still on for a rescue that would accept Chy.

THE CHRISTMAS THAT CHANGED THEIR LIVES

It started as any ordinary Christmas a few months later, but it was about to prove to be a Christmas that changed Ariana’s life, and saved another. After Ariana opened all her presents, her mother handed her a small, beautifully wrapped box. Inside was a letter from Chy, written by Ariana’s older sister. “*I belong to you now and together we will run the fields and trails forever. Love, Chy.*”

They set out to explore the world as only a girl and her horse can. At least the world as big as the boarding farm. But there was plenty to do there and they did it all. They rode the pastures, played games in the ring, started to bend poles and run barrels. Chy loved to run.

Then the horror returned. Ariana noticed Chy had problems in her right eye. For a year she and her mother battled to save the sight in that eye. They seemed to be holding their own. So it was perfectly natural to accept the invitation to go on their first-ever trail ride with friends. It was a 12-mile ride and the excitement was high. Down the trail they went, Ariana confident and high-spirited, Chy as strong and safe as ever. But as they traveled along, things happened that tore at Ariana’s heart. Chy stumbled, and she never stumbled. Instead of jumping a small jump, she ran right through it. Ariana took great care to guide her beloved horse back to the trailer. A vet check that evening proved the worst: Chy had lost all vision in the right eye, too, suddenly and unexplainably.

Blaming herself, Ariana never took Chy off the farm again. She never took her to shows and certainly would not risk hurting her on the trails. So for five years they just played together at the farm. But it was much more than play. Ariana talked to Chy for hours on end, and together they made plans and invented ways for a blind horse to “see the world.” Ariana knew Chy loved to play. She knew she loved to run barrels, bend poles and even jump a little. So, learning from each other, they set out on the next phase of their journey. Ariana would help Chy to do all the things she loved to do by “seeing through her heart.”

They put Chy in a paddock with her friend, a safe older horse named Britches, and Ariana studied how Chy would follow Britches by the sound of her footsteps. So she began to lead Chy, making sure to stomp her feet as a signal to step up or down, or just to be careful. She noticed how Chy would carefully use her whiskers to find the opening in the gate or other obstacles, carefully reaching out and touching with her nose. Ariana began to incorporate the things Chy did on her own into how she handled her when they played. She knew they could ride again, because Chy always listened to her and loved to play and had a heart as big as the moon. Ariana set about inventing ways to communicate to Chy the things she couldn't see.

First, as she led Chy, she began to add words to her stomping feet signals. She taught Chy to step up, step down, slow down and later even jump. She led her through the poles, allowing Chy to stop and touch each pole as she had seen her investigate the gate opening. Together they learned the barrel course the same way—one step at a time. When Chy was ready, Ariana rode her through the courses and began to add leg and body cues to the voice cues. Their runs became flawless, and Chy was so sensitive that if Ariana got out of balance she would adjust to rebalance her.

Eventually there came a day when Ariana thought perhaps they could leave the farm and go to a fun show. Chy loves to have fun. But Ariana still worried and it turned out her worry caused Chy to refuse the trailer. Looking back now, Ariana says Chy knew it was really Ariana who wasn't ready. Just as Ariana was always careful to look out for Chy, so did Chy look out for Ariana, and she knew her partner was not quite herself that morning. And just as sometimes she needed to adjust to rebalance Ariana in the saddle, she made an adjustment to keep her safe that day.

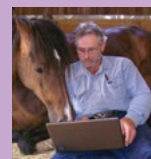
A few months later they tried again, and this time all went well. It was their first fun show since Chy lost her sight. In every event they entered they placed in the ribbons. They've been to a few more shows, always placing in the ribbons. They are back on the trail too. On the trail Ariana will always allow other horses to go ahead because she noticed Chy does rely on a horse in front to lead the way and follows their footsteps around obstacles.

"SHE'S NEVER HAD A BAD DAY"

Through it all, Chy has never had a bad day. Ariana says she never once acted mean or ever wanted to give up. She is always willing to happily try the next new adventure. Chy loves people, she loves fun and she loves going places and meeting new friends. Chy and Ariana have discussed more exciting plans for their future. They are planning to visit therapeutic riding centers and work with children and veterans. Ariana believes that Chy's big heart and powerful determination to overcome her own situation will help change lives. She knows it has changed hers. Their journey together continues and in the near future they will begin to invite others to be part of their journey, showing folks that circumstances are not obstacles, just different trails to follow. And seeing with your heart may be the very best kind of sight of all.



"Together we soar."



Dutch Henry is a writer and novelist who writes about "People & Horses Helping Horses & People." He resides in Virginia with his wife of 36 years,

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