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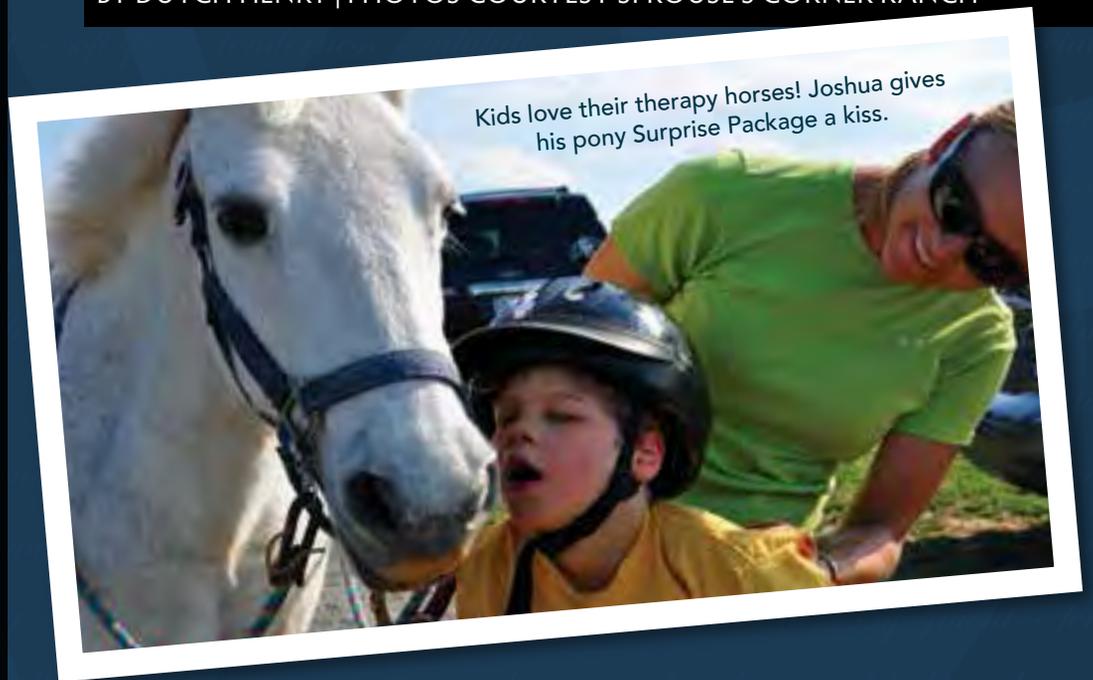
A woman with long brown hair, wearing a brown and white plaid shirt, is kneeling on a sandy beach. She is petting a large horse with a white body and black patches. The horse has a long, flowing white mane. The background shows the ocean waves under a blue sky.

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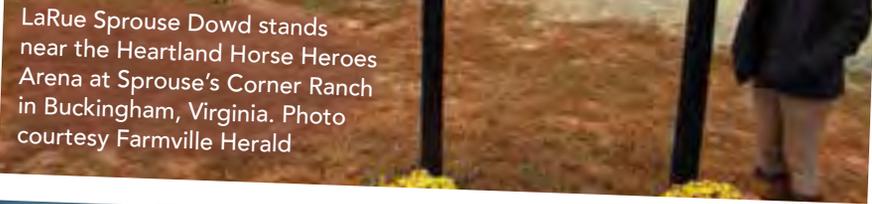
LARUE SPROUSE DOWD AND SPROUSE'S CORNER RANCH IN VIRGINIA EMBRACE THE GOODNESS THAT COMES FROM THE SPIRIT OF THE HORSE

## A LIFETIME OF LOVING & LEARNING FROM HORSES

BY DUTCH HENRY | PHOTOS COURTESY SPROUSE'S CORNER RANCH



There are two riding rings at Sprouse's Corner Ranch in the heart of Virginia. Both rings are learning, loving and growing places. In the main ring, children come to learn to ride, appreciate and love horses. The other riding ring is called Heartland Horse Heroes ring; in that ring a special kind of magic happens. That magic is equine-assisted therapy, and children learn not only to ride and appreciate horses, but they also learn to sit tall, smile and sometimes say their first word, or focus on a task, thought or game. In both rings horses lead the way under the watchful eye and gentle encouragement of owner LaRue Sprouse Dowd. In both rings more than learning to sit a horse happens.



LaRue Sprouse Dowd stands near the Heartland Horse Heroes Arena at Sprouse's Corner Ranch in Buckingham, Virginia. Photo courtesy Farmville Herald

LaRue's nature is one of kindness, support, positive attitude and optimism. Her students, their parents, the volunteers, boarders and horses all benefit from her ability to help others believe in themselves, try harder and find the joy in the moment. Whether that moment is mastering a new horsemanship skill, understanding the importance of patience or caring for the horses, LaRue is always able to offer upbeat advice and guidance, helping others to see the world through positive eyes.

It is LaRue's mission to help children embrace and understand the goodness that comes from the spirit of the horse and the lessons young folks can learn while around horses. Not all the lessons happen in the rings; for the Heartland students, there is a new classroom where horse-related activities help the children master little details. For other students and boarders, trails through the surrounding forest and fields offer a different dimension to mastering horsemanship skills and having fun with horses.

### FIVE GENERATIONS

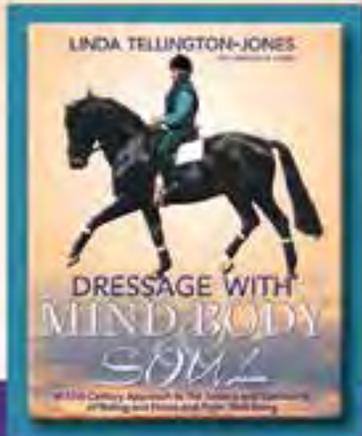
There is a depth to LaRue's teachings and understanding, given to her by a lifetime of loving and learning from horses and talented people. Sprouse's Corner Ranch has been in the family for five generations, and when LaRue was first exploring life with horses, she and her daddy would drive the far fields that today are home base for her operations, imagining where the horse fields, barn and riding rings could be. Back then many of those fields were overgrown cattle pastures, but together they could see LaRue's dreams take shape. Before finishing high school, LaRue owned 10 horses, had trained other people's horses, had begun to give riding lessons and knew horses would be her life.

When it came time to choose a college, LaRue looked to Kentucky where she could be near the American Saddlebreds she'd fallen in love with. She decided on Morehead State University, with its major horse program as well as the nursing program she sought. Eventually she shifted from nursing to vet tech. She remembers her mother's counsel during this time. "Just do what you love," her mother advised. Morehead had a terrific vet tech program with a busy barn, lots of horses and hands-on learning. LaRue says she just about lived at the barn.

After graduation, she took a job as a groom with a Saddlebred barn on the world championship circuit. She rode a lot of horses and started young ones. One of the stallions she started went on to become a five-time world champion. The trainer told her if she stayed with him, he could "take her places." By that time, however, LaRue had seen the other side of the Saddlebred saddle-seat world—from the horse's perspective. She decided the horses paid too high a

continued next page

“LaRue knew there were simply too many children in her hometown who needed something good and solid to hang onto. She knew, too, that she and the horses could offer that solid something.”



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LaRue Sprouse Dowd gives instruction on how to catch and halter a pony.



price for those blue ribbons, and she politely declined the trainer's offer.

## A NEW DIRECTION

LaRue chose to go back to school and further her vet-tech studies. During her time at the Saddlebred barn, she met Mimi Porter, who was one of the first to introduce rehabilitative therapy to performance horses. This really intrigued LaRue. Mimi headed an equine therapy program at Midway College for about 20 years, and now she wanted to teach it to others. So she created a bachelor's degree program. LaRue graduated from Mimi's course, earning her second bachelor's degree.

During her years at Midway, LaRue took a night position at a large veterinary clinic in Lexington as a vet tech, where she continued to broaden and deepen her understanding of horses, equine health and people's responsibility to horses. She even had the opportunity to put into practice the equine therapy she learned from Mimi.

Mimi helped her students find jobs and introduced LaRue to the racehorse world. LaRue moved to Saratoga, New York and got her own license to work on the Saratoga track giving therapy to horses. This is no small feat to accomplish, and LaRue did it by working with a veterinarian, using the techniques she learned from Mimi, demonstrating the value on individual cases. That vet signed for her license. Eventually she had licenses for Saratoga, Keeneland, Belmont and Palm Springs. During this time, LaRue also had the honor of working with Marvin Cain, the man responsible for first bringing acupuncture to horses in the US. She had studied his techniques in college, but now she had the chance to meet and work with him.

## RETURN TO THE DREAM

In 2006 LaRue moved back to Virginia, bringing with her all she'd learned, with a dream to build a haven where people could learn the joys of horses. She had never forgotten the trails she'd ridden until dark after school, and the days she and her daddy drove the overgrown fields picturing the horse pastures, riding rings and barns. It was time now to bring those dreams to life. It would take two years to clear the overgrown fields, build fences, rings and barns. During that time she worked as a barn manager at a nearby equestrian center.

She had a pretty clear vision of what she would do. LaRue knew how much horses had meant to her in her down times. She also knew there were simply too many children in her hometown who needed something good and solid to hang onto. She knew, too, that she and the horses could offer that solid some-

LaRue Sprouse Dowd, CHA- and PATH-certified instructor, giving a group lesson at summer camp.



thing. Her name honors her two grandmothers, Lucille and Ruth. Respect for those who came before, and commitment to community are important to LaRue and her family. In 2008 she opened Sprouse's Corner Ranch with the mission to help kids through horses.

She hit the ground running, offering riding lessons, coaching, boarding, training, trail riding, summer camps and shows. Part of her plan was to provide a way for the children to use what they learn through participating in horse shows. These shows are sanctioned, and points are earned toward breed and club awards. The community embraced her vision with robust enthusiasm, and from the very first day Sprouse's Corner Ranch was a happy, busy place.

She also began volunteering at Heartland Horse Heroes (HHH), a nearby therapeutic riding center founded by her friend, Amy Allison. LaRue became certified by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) as a therapeutic riding instructor. A year later HHH relocated to LaRue's ranch when LaRue saw the good it did for the children.

Under her stewardship HHH has grown to offer not only private therapeutic riding lessons for children but also a program for the local county elementary special education school children. And this spring HHH will be offering a new program for at-risk youths through Inner City Slickers, a national program founded by Michael McMeel, that has had over 10,000 youths through the program (see HEARTBEATS, December 2013).

LaRue's commitment to helping horses remains strong. Part of what she does so well is to lead by example. Her lesson horses work once per day, three to five days per week. The horses in the therapeutic riding program only perform therapeutic lesson duties once a week. All therapy and les-

son horses also go on trail rides so they can stretch their legs and clear their minds. Her volunteers and students are taught "release and relax" exercises for the horses, and they are part of the program. The horses have large fields to romp in and healthy herd environments. Some of her lesson horses are rescues.

LaRue works closely with Beauty's Haven Equine Rescue through a farm near her ranch. LaRue not only adopts and gives homes and jobs to rescue horses, but she helps find homes for many others—15 last year. She has recently launched a new program for adoption where adoptees can take on a horse, board with LaRue and take lessons for two months, just to be sure the match is perfect.

Wisdom born of years working with horses and people in many different environments and situations is what LaRue Dowd offers to children, parents and horses. Kindness and understanding is her secret recipe that makes it work so well, for the people, and the horses.



Dutch Henry is a novelist and writer who writes about "People & Horses Helping Horses & People" and resides in Virginia with his wife of 36 years, Robin; along with one horse, dogs, cats and chickens. Dutch also does free "Therapy For Therapy Horse Clinics" at therapeutic riding centers across the country to help horses maintain proper posture, free-and-easy movement and body carriage. You can reach Dutch at [dutchhenry@hughes.net](mailto:dutchhenry@hughes.net) He would love to hear from you. Join his blog at, <http://dutchhenry.blogspot.com> His novel "We'll Have the Summer," is available on Amazon and Dutch's website [www.dutchhenryauthor.com](http://www.dutchhenryauthor.com)