

Winthrop Valley Life: Giddy Up

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It's the stuff of legend: local gal wearing only bikini and sandals jumps on horse and rides bareback through the forest to evacuate half a dozen horses from a fire. It's dramatic and epic—like something out of an adventure film, but not something that really could have happened, right? And yet as the Cub Creek fire spread, so did the rumors about such an escapade.

But you don't want the rumor—you want to know what really happened.

Here's what really happened: a local gal wearing only a bikini and sandals jumped on her horse and rode bareback through the forest to evacuate half a dozen horses from a fire. ON HER BIRTHDAY.

Jenna Kokes, a 2003 graduate of Liberty Bell High School and co-owner of Winthrop Physical Therapy and Fitness, was at Heckendorn Park, about to celebrate her birthday by floating the river with her girlfriends, when her phone rang. It was her husband Brett, who was home with the couple's young children. "There's a fire," he said. "Come home."



Jenna left her paddleboard with her friends, and drove home, reaching her family's 500-acre ranch off Cub Creek Road only to find a fire truck stationed at the bottom of the road. "I have horses," she told the firefighter. "I need to go up."

When Jenna reached Brett at their home on Spook Haven Road, they agreed that Brett would get the kids to safety while Jenna would deal with the family's five horses and another six horses boarding at the ranch.

Jenna's mom, Cathy Upper, was out of cell range and had the family's truck and horse trailer with her, so Jenna called others for advice—including Annie Budiselich of Methow Valley Riding Unlimited—about horse safety.

Jenna knew that it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to evacuate all 11 horses together, primarily because most of the boarding horses weren't familiar with each other, let alone with Jenna's five horses. "Them not knowing each other could cause problems," Jenna said. "They might not be willing to follow the lead horse." The horses were agitated, perhaps partly because of the smoke and partly because Jenna was racing around the pastures, opening gates, talking on her phone, and somehow finding time to pull on a pair of shorts over her swimsuit—a choice that would later serve her well, although not as well as a pair of jeans would have.

As Jenna was collecting the various horses, a fire truck showed up and out jumped local firefighter Jeremiah Fosness, who shouted out "Happy birthday, Jenna!" as he began the work of defending the homes on the property.

Jenna decided to leave the six boarding horses in a large, irrigated hayfield, and to lead her own five horses out of Cub Creek the back way, over to the Rendezvous, an area she knows well from exploring it on foot and on horseback. After getting a lead rope on Roxy, her big black quarterhorse, Jenna leaped aboard without aid of stirrup or saddle, something she hasn't done in—ahem!—quite a few years.

“Somehow,” she says, “I was able to jump on Roxy, who is 15.3 [hands], and ride her bareback with just a lead rope on her; she didn't even have a bridle or anything.”



Jenna has been riding Roxy for 14 years, and they've developed a trusting relationship. “I traded her for a saddle I'd won,” Jenna says. “That horse has bucked me off and she spooks at her shadow. But she knew something was up that day.”

As Jenna and Roxy headed uphill with four other horses following them, the ride quickly became the type of extreme fitness workout that Jenna might devise at the gym for a client, rounded out with side dishes of fear and self-doubt. Wearing shorts and Birkenstocks, her thighs clamping the horse's bare back, Jenna had to work hard to remain on Roxy and to keep her sandals on her feet. (You will be as disappointed as I was when you learn that Jenna couldn't be bothered to take a selfie during her wild ride. What with the whole clinging for dear life to the slippery flanks of a large mammal, I guess it just didn't occur to her.)

Her shorts had no pockets, so Jenna had to hold her cell phone in one hand and the lead rope in the other, guiding Roxy and keeping the other horses in line. “It was the best workout ever,” Jenna says, “but it took a couple of days to be able to unclench and relax my legs after that. I'm just now able to get back in the gym and start recovering.”

Once Jenna reached the upper end of Rendezvous Road, she stopped at the home of Dave Johnson, who helped her put all the horses in a pen and loaned her an ATV so she could ride out to cell service. When her phone connected, Jenna saw 80 messages on her screen and a wave of community support advancing up the road: seven different local residents hauling horse trailers. “I had talked to Tulie Budiselich while I was gathering up the horses,” Jenna says, “and she called people, and word spread, and people wanted to

help. Carrie and Deed Fink showed up with a giant stock trailer, so we were able to take the horses all together.”

Meanwhile, Brett, a former hotshot firefighter from Montana, and Brian Campbell, a local firefighter who is married to Jenna’s cousin, helped defend houses on the family’s ranch, including starting a back burn. The houses were saved, says Jenna, although everything around the structures is now “in the black.”

For Jenna, processing the ordeal happens in waves. “I was really glad to have something to do, to keep me from just watching and worrying,” she says. “We’d always talked through what we’d do if we had to evacuate, and when the time came I knew it was my responsibility. I had to kind of go into a zone and just do what needed to be done.”

Later in the evening of her big ride, Jenna got a Facebook memory from her 2014 birthday, a couple of days into the Carlton Complex fire. “Um yeah,” she says. “Next year maybe I’ll get a boring birthday.”

