

For The Greater Good

WITH SOME HELP FROM FRIENDS AND COMPLETE STRANGERS,
RIDER GETS CHANCE TO LIVE HER DREAM **BY MARGARET STORRS**



Audra Wagstaff of Coweta, Oklahoma, and One Shinin Harley placed third in the Supported Riders Walk-Trot Trail. Jeff Zaloudek, the father of another competitor led the team in the class. **Photo by Larry Williams.**

Our equine community possesses the powerful ability to come together and help those in need. Audra Wagstaff of Coweta, Oklahoma, and her family learned just how much this past August.

Audra, 25, had been practicing for weeks to prepare for the National Snaffle Bit Association's World Championship Show. This would be her first year to attend.

With the Oklahoma heat raging over 100 degrees, Audra and her horse, Harley, would practice at 6:30 every morning or in the evenings when it was cooler. Her mother, Angie, who is also her coach, was right by her side.

With each passing day their anticipation grew. Never before had Audra competed at an event of this magnitude.

But fate was about to step in and it looked like Audra was about to be dealt another cruel blow.

As a child, Audra suffered from intractable seizures. At age 6, she underwent a complete corpus callosotomy, her mother explained. This rendered

her unable to speak. Audra had to relearn how to walk, feed herself. She had to learn how to live again. Her brain suffered neurological damage from the seizures causing the hemispheres of her brain to struggle to work congruently.

Her physicians suggested equine therapy to help her body recover. Studies show that equine therapy helps resolve calamities not only involving the body but the brain as well.

"Equine therapy helped Audra tremendously. It made the process a thousand times better," Angie Wagstaff said. "Not only did riding help Audra physically, it became a much enjoyed part of her life."

The Wagstaffs purchased One Shinin Harley when the AQHA mare was a 3-year-old. With training, Harley became just what they needed for Audra. They have been riding pals ever since.

This year, the Wagstaffs received an invitation to compete at the 2010 NSBA World Championship Show, the second year RWD classes were being offered at the annual event. At first the family thought Audra would not be able to attend for financial reasons. They later learned help may be available. Audra applied for and received a grant from the NSBA Foundation, which enabled her and her family to attend.

Trail is Audra's favorite class. When she received the Trail pattern for the World Show she practiced every day.

One evening, just a week before they were scheduled to leave for the World Show, Angie was in a riding accident. Audra had just finished up Trail practice and her father, Jerry Wagstaff, had just picked her up. Angie stayed behind to continue working with Harley. It was then that the mare slipped and fell near a water trough in their arena. Angie's leg was severely injured. Her knee was broken and there was trauma to the surrounding tendons. Immediate surgery was required.

"I called Becky Volkert (in the NSBA office), Tuesday August 18th to inform her that, given the circumstances, Audra would not be able to attend the World Show," she said.

Angie was taken by surprise when Volkert told her she would arrange for caregivers for Audra

and handlers for Harley if they could find someone to haul their horse to the show.

With a little help from friends and complete strangers Audra's dream was again a possibility.

Jeff Riggs, a dear friend, hauled Harley to Tulsa where they were met by a team of volunteers that helped get the horse and rider settled in.

- Barbara Thurman acted as Audra's care giver.
- Jamie Herwald and Lindsey Weick, of Partners for Progress, an equine therapy center in Illinois, helped prepare Harley, for the show by clipping, banding and bathing her.
- Lindsey Weick led Audra in the Supported Trail class.
- Jeff Zaloudek, the parent of another RWD exhibitor led Audra in the Walk/Trot Pleasure class.

• Vallerie Sweeton, leading therapist of Horses of Hope, a therapeutic riding program with facilities in Missouri and Kansas, assisted as side walker for Audra when she showed.

Angie went into surgery Friday morning at the Oklahoma Surgical Hospital where she works as a registered nurse. When Angie awoke from anesthesia she was told Audra had placed third in the Supported Rider Walk/Trot Trail.

On Saturday, Audra showed again placing third in the Supported Rider Walk/Trot Western Pleasure. This time Angie was able to watch from her hospital room using the web cam.

"I cannot begin to tell you what this last week has meant to Audra and our family," Angie Wagstaff wrote in a letter of appreciation sent to the NSBA office. "Audra received beautiful trophies, pictures and got to eat pizza with the other kids. It was a dream how people came together and made it all possible. The NSBA World Show was truly a world class event for us and we will definitely be back next year."

Angie Wagstaff has recently been certified as a Special Olympics coach and plans to bring an equestrian team to the 2011 NSBA World Show.

Participation in the RWD classes has nearly doubled at the NSBA World Show – from 19 exhibitors in 2009, the first year they were offered, to 30 in 2010.

"The increase in participation in RWD classes at our World Show is directly related to the commitment of the NSBA staff and the association as a whole," said Jay Jordan, a member of the NSBA Board of Directors who was instrumental in introducing the concept to the association. "Our work has touched a lot of people. To see smiles on the faces of the participants is a blessing in itself, making us even more motivated in our work."

"The NSBA mission statement enounces the importance on supporting shows and exhibits as well as promoting interest in younger generations. As horsemen, it is our responsibility to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to 'love the horse.'"

This year, the association expanded the program to include RWD classes at some NSBA sanctioned shows, such as Gordyville USA. With each show participation grows.

"The NSBA provides sponsorship and aid to exhibitors of RWD and their families," Jordan said. "These funds come directly from supporting NSBA members. That is why it is imperative that NSBA and its members continue to support the RWD program and its riders," explains Jordan.

For individuals with disabilities, interaction with horses can make all the difference. The movement of the body while riding mimics the movement of a person walking. For many



people riding has been a key in developing muscular strength, balance and coordination. It increases concentration, problem solving skills and boosts the self confidence of the individual by providing a physically and mentally constructive environment.

Programs such as Horses of Hope, Partners for Progress and Bit by Bit, of Claremore Oklahoma, where Audra Wagstaff rides, provide horses that have been trained for therapy along with a specialized staff. These programs help riders develop themselves individually while also providing an atmosphere that allows them to interact with others and experience being part of a team and working together.

"The NSBA World Show gives these kids something to work for," Angie Wagstaff said. "If it wasn't for the people who have supported the making of RWD classes, people like my daughter would have never had the opportunity to experience let alone participate in something like the NSBA World Show. I cannot begin to explain the feeling in my heart. All I can do is say thank you."

Lindsey Weick leads Audra and Harley as they compete in the RWD Supported Rider Trail class. The team placed third but almost didn't even get the chance to participate.

Photo by Larry Williams