

# Finding her soul in the saddle

Dedication to learning leads to unexpected discovery for teacher Abi Henneberry

By **Katherine Abbass** - Freelance Contributor



Abi Henneberry will never forget her first horseback ride. It was the weekend of her 40th birthday on a trip to Jasper: a short trail ride through the golden forests of mid-October.

Henneberry and a friend shifted in their saddles as their horses sidestepped thick roots along the dusty path.

Halfway through the ride, a rodent darted out from the brush and scurried across the trail, prompting a chain reaction. The rodent's effect on one horse — a brief flurry of shuffle-steps — carried through to the next, until each horse and rider had felt its presence on the path.

It was a lesson about the relationship between environment and energy, a lesson Henneberry reinforces daily with her kindergarteners at Lois E. Hole Elementary School in St. Albert. There, Henneberry's students begin each morning with a nature walk, learning to connect with their environment and be aware of themselves in it.

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Soon, Henneberry will bring these same lessons to a new set of students, riders at Little Bits Therapeutic Riding Association for Persons with Disabilities. As she nears retirement from school teaching, Henneberry is working to become a certified therapeutic riding instructor.

Despite growing up in Lexington, Kentucky — a city dubbed the horse capital of the world — Henneberry didn't ride horses at all as a child.

“We had cats, frogs, birds, turtles, everything else, but we weren’t ever going to touch [horses], financially,” she says.

But Henneberry always knew she wanted to be a teacher. As a kid, she spent hours in her bedroom delivering lessons to imaginary students, foreshadowing her choice to open her own dance studio in Virginia decades later. This passion followed Henneberry when she married and relocated to Canada.

Settling in Edmonton, she successfully auditioned for the folk-dance company Vinok, with whom she toured extensively for just over two years. When she began to feel that dance was encroaching on family time, Henneberry enrolled at the University of Alberta as a 39-year-old student, ready to begin her Bachelor of Education after degree.

It was during this period that Henneberry went on her first horseback ride in Jasper. Returning from that experience, she felt pulled toward a new path, toward a hobby she could share with her young daughters while allowing her military husband the time and space he needed to work through the effects of PTSD that could sideline him with little warning.

“I was looking for purpose, connection, recreation and enjoyment,” Henneberry recalls.

And she found it. Working with horses satisfied her passion for the outdoors, as well as her desire to connect with her daughters; it also repositioned her as a learner.

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In 2017, after riding recreationally for many years, Henneberry began volunteering at Little Bits Therapeutic Riding Association, a nonprofit organization that provides recreational horseback riding with therapeutic benefits for children and adults with disabilities. Approximately 200 riders participate in their programs each year, and Henneberry has clocked approximately 200 hours as a volunteer.

At the Little Bits stable in Edmonton’s River valley, the pungent stable smell of hay and horses is overwhelming. As Henneberry strolls past, horses peek out from their stalls, reaching toward her for a pat. In the tack room, the walls are lined with modified stirrups, reins and saddles to accommodate each rider’s individual needs. Henneberry draws a parallel between these modifications and those used in an elementary classroom — pedal desks, wiggle seats, noise-cancelling headphones. The learning tools are different, but the results are similar.

Jo Billington, Henneberry’s mentor at Little Bits, asserts that Henneberry’s willingness to embrace her role as a beginner will contribute to her success as an instructor.

“She sees the parallels between classroom and arena teaching. She goes in with a plan, but she’s able to adapt.”

Fortunately, Henneberry is adept at embracing change. To stay fresh, she believes, everyone should try something new at least once a year.

“As teachers, when we put ourselves in positions to function as beginners, we can better appreciate what our students are trying to accomplish.”

## Riding along with Abi Henneberry



**What is one significant difference and one significant similarity between Alberta's capital region and Lexington, Kentucky, where you grew up?**

Believe it or not, one similarity is the terrain — rolling hills and beautiful areas for horse farms! One tremendous difference is the extremity of the winter weather. In Kentucky, we only had pictures of horse-drawn sleighs in the snow, while in Edmonton they exist and can be used frequently!

**As an advocate of trying new things, what have you tried that was the most disastrous for you?**

Trying to learn to ride a motorcycle! I signed up for lessons and had an accident while on the course. They offered me a private session to get beyond the fearful experience. I took the extra lesson, and that was enough for me. While the instructors were fantastic, let's just say that I relate much better to animals and living things than machines!

**If you could create a reality show that fits your current interests, what would it be about?**

Endurance riding. I began riding with people who did that, and my goal was to do the Tevis Cup Ride, known formally as the Western States Trail Ride, by the time I was 50. My children became interested in other equine activities, so I put that aside. Now, I am able to put that in my sights again and am aligning myself with people to help make that happen!

**What do you love most about dance?**

The fact that it combines so many factors: music, emotion, movement, expression, intellect, physicality, creativity, memory and joy! The process is the best part!

**What dance craze is most cringeworthy for you?**

The Dab and the Floss. Enough said!

**What do you find most rewarding about volunteering for Little Bits?**

The fact that the horse activities bring joy and inspiration to its participants, including the families. I can witness people release their challenges and experience simple pleasures taken for granted by so many of us. It is grounding, humbling and joyful!

It also reminds me to stay present in the moment and be grateful for what I can do.