



Sharing the love of horses with your offspring.

by Alice Chan

From the time he could toddle, whenever there was the opportunity, I would put my son, Benjamin, atop ponies. Round little chestnut miniature horses at the farmer's market. A grey Welsh pony in rainy England. Tucked in front of me on a beach trail horse.

As he got older, he would accompany me on vacation pleasure rides, usually ponied behind the lead guide. I remember a particularly freezing, wet and windswept ride one November on a deserted beach in Northern California, when he was 7. He was pretty miserable about being soaked to the skin, and only by pretending he was a Star Wars trooper did we save the day.

Let me be clear, I don't think he particularly enjoyed these equestrian adventures. I have been pony-mad since before I could talk—a passion my parents never really shared or fully supported—and probably somewhere, buried not too deep in my psyche, was a desire to share my love of equines with him. By the time he was 12, he had probably been on horseback no more than 10 times, and more to humor me than anything else.

Then everything changed. In 2015 we went to Ireland for a family wedding, and hopping aboard a couple of sturdy Connemara ponies we had the chance to canter through boggy open countryside. And in that moment, feeling the wind rushing past his face, and hearing the beat of

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hooves on the ground, he was hooked. Within an hour of drying-off (this time the rain didn't seem to bother him as much) Benjamin told me he was in search of a sport and wanted to go riding every week when we got home to California.

And so it all began. I figured that if he was going to take lessons, I may as well join him, and heaven knows I pretty much had to start over. It had been nearly 13 years since I had ridden regularly. I had no intention of owning a horse, let alone the two we now have. Never imagined that his desire to "find a new sport" would result in a deep commitment and passion that would rival my own.

A Steady Start

For the first couple of years, he tried a few different disciplines, from mastering the basics of english riding to jumping, trail riding and even a pretty long stint learning horseback archery. I followed him every step of the way.

Within two years, I ended up buying a 3 year old Morgan mare for myself. A mid-life crisis, or baby substitute? Perhaps. She quickly became part of our family and Benjamin fell in love with her and started to understand the commitment and joy of owning a horse.



Then in 2018 everything geared up about 10 notches. In April he declared that he wanted to take part in a show or two, so we found a new barn for him to ride at and focus on his jumping. In the back of his mind, he always thought that eventing would be for him, but it was hard to find a local trainer with horses he could ride.

Suddenly, we were both showing, and sometimes at the same time. Me with my young mare,

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doing hunter pole classes, and him working his way up to canter cross-rails and beyond. I've found myself in the show ring torn between wanting to watch him in the adjacent ring, and riding my ride.

An eventing summer camp sealed the deal. Suddenly, dressage was something he enjoyed doing. Jumping giant logs and miniatures houses got his adrenalin going.

After a couple of events, he declared that he wanted the chance to take it further with his own horse. And watching how eagerly he would soak up the input of his trainers, and step up his skills within the space of a 45-minute lesson, I decided to support him. The wonderfully accomplished eventer, Rouge et Blanc, "Roger" to his friends, entered our lives in October.

So here we are. Two horses. A truck. A trailer. Big monthly bills. Me working as hard as I can to make it all happen. A busy 2019 ahead with lots of time on the road. Together. And as everyone keeps telling me, it's a dream come true that my 16-year-old and I share this passion, the love of our horses and get to spend all this time together. I have to pinch myself often.

There are ups and downs, of course. We get to critique each other in training - which is sometimes really helpful, and on other occasions we irritate the hell out of each other. We've both met really wonderful people our own age(!) through the sport, and the shows and training gatherings provide fun social interactions.

Showing at the same time is a really bad idea, because there are never enough hands to go around. Knowing firsthand what it takes to go cross-country, my heart is literally in my mouth as I watch him go round. It's a blessing and a curse to relate to the experience.

Sometimes it feels like we spend too much time together, and there's little downtime. But as the mom of a high school sophomore, I know that the clock is ticking on this sweet period together so I'm hungrily soaking it all in.

If you get the opportunity to share something deeply with your child, leap at it.

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Author Alice Chan's son Benjamin Heckman, an eventer, was profiled in our December 2018 issue, which can be found at www.ridingmagazine.com.

Have a perspective you'd like to share with our readers? Send it to kimfmiller1@mac.com.