

Show jumper Woodpecker de Villars transitions to Adult Equitation, bringing healing joy to rider Marcy Connelly Wehde.

by Winter Hoffman • photos: 2018 ESI Photography

Against a stunning backdrop of purple foothills under a cornflower blue sky at the Coachella Desert Circuit, Marcy Connelly Wehde adjusted her tack, smoothed her show coat and studied the course. She was embarking on her first Big Eq Adult Medal with her new mount Woodpecker de Villars (2002 Wandango x Joue Fleur de Lys), also known as “Woody.”

For Marcy, age 39, Vice President of Operations for California Receivership Group, this was a sublime moment.



She started riding when she was 7 years old on a Shetland pony. She and her sister spent hours jumping over makeshift jumps in their yard in Carmel. Cut to her first show pony and much success in the pony hunters, the junior hunters and big eq/medal classes, as well as the jumper ring. After graduating college, establishing her career and getting married, tragedy struck. Her husband passed away very suddenly and unexpectedly in 2014. Horses got her through.

“Seven days a week, I’d wake up and go ride a gentle schoolmaster of a horse. It gave me a reason to get up in the morning, and for the few hours that I was at the barn, I got a break from my grief,” she said.

Unfortunately a few months after her husband's death, she suffered another tragedy, a severely herniated disc. She could not walk, much less ride. Her brother had to carry her to the car and drive her to doctor appointments. Doctors and physical therapists helped, but after two years of continuing pain and not being able to ride, she found out about a program at New England Baptist Hospital in Boston, MA. They have a cutting edge program aptly named "back boot camp," where they put patients through a rigorous program of back strengthening. They work with athletes from many different sports and teams including the Boston Celtics, the Boston Ballet, various Olympic athletes, as well as non-athletes who are just looking to get out of pain.

Marcy spent a month in Boston under the care of Dr. Rainville and physical therapist Lisa Childs, who assured her that they could get her back on a horse. She spent five days a week in the gym getting her strength back, and came up with a plan to phase back into riding. Within a month of finishing their program, she was back on a horse and almost completely pain-free.

Within two months, an old acquaintance, rider Zazou Hoffman, told her about a horse that might be a good fit for her. That horse was Woody. Zazou (winner of the 2009 ASPCA Maclay National Equitation Medal Final) rides and is the assistant trainer at Meadowgrove Farm. "I jumped my first ever Grand Prix class on Woody and I love him for all he taught me. He was in great condition but it was starting to feel more difficult for him to jump the Grand Prix classes, so when it came time for him to step down I thought he would really enjoy a new career with Marcy," said Zazou. "It has been a great match and it makes me really happy to see Woody still out there winning!"

Woody's Transition

Zazou was competing Woody in the Grand Prix while owner Saree Kayne was taking a break to plan her wedding. Saree had competed Woody in Europe on a summer tour with Olympian Lauren Hough. At one point, the horse had been long listed for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games.

"Woody had a great purpose for myself and Zazou in the higher level jumpers and it's great to see him still fit and happy at a lower level job. He really loves people and it's wonderful he has such a strong relationship with Marcy," said Saree.

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