

CENTER FOR AMERICA'S FIRST HORSE

Story / Kate Carter
Photographs / Glenn Callahan

One woman's dream just might save a breed

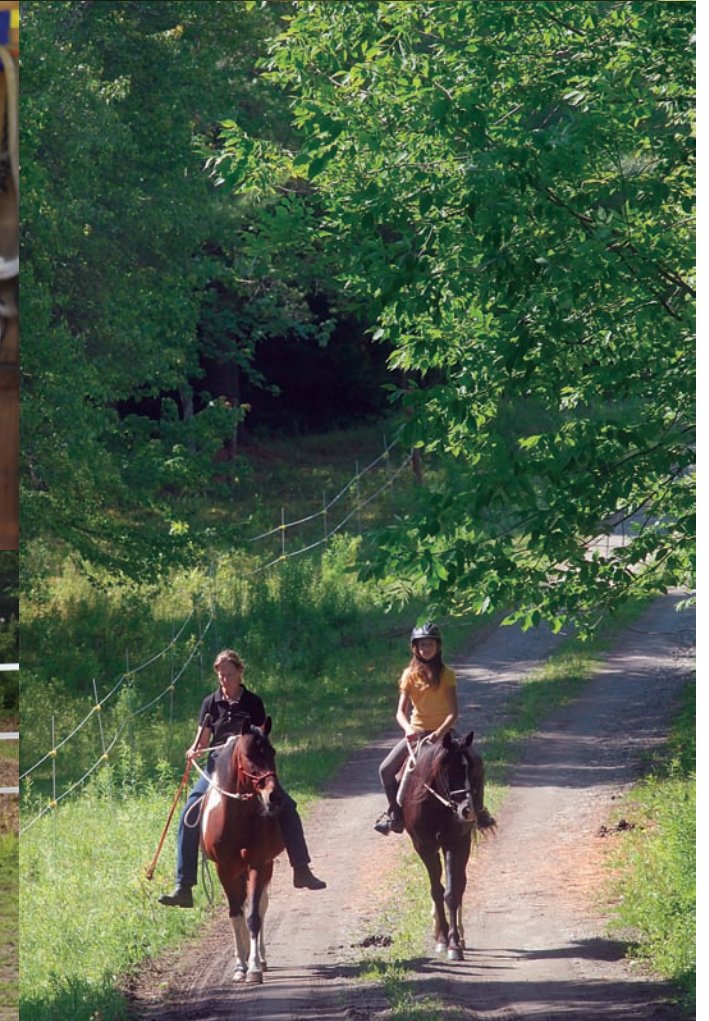


the spanish colonial
SAVING A RARE BREED

Stephanie Lockhart has an ambitious dream to save America's first horse. Colonial Spanish horses, also called Spanish mustangs or Barbs, first came to North America on the ships of Spanish explorers in the 16th century. For hundreds of years, it was the only breed in America. But when the government remount program took place in the 1800s, these original Spanish horses were crossbred with thoroughbreds, draft horses, and other popular European breeds. While the Colonial Spanish horse is considered the foundation breed of most of America's breeds, the true Colonial Spanish horse nearly became extinct in North America by the mid 1900s. Today there are only about 3,000 left in the world.

Stephanie Lockhart of Morrisville, Vt., who specializes in natural horsemanship, is working hard to reverse this disheartening trend. In just six short years she has gone from knowing almost nothing about Colonial Spanish horses to founding The Center for America's First Horse, Inc., located near Johnson State College in Johnson. The center's mission is to enrich people's lives through the spirit of the Colonial Spanish horse, and to conserve the rare breed through education and public awareness. "My dream is to develop a facility that offers hands-on opportunities in education about Colonial Spanish horses and about natural horsemanship,"

Preceding pages: Stephanie Lockhart, director of the Center for America's First Horse, puts Whirling Thunder through his paces. **Clockwise from top right:** Eliza Lockhart tunes into her mount's mood. Stephanie and Eliza ride down a quiet lane at the center. Stephanie works her magic. Stephanie gets ready for a trail ride.



KATE CARTER

explains Stephanie. “In my opinion, most of today’s modern breeds have been bred for specific reasons—performance, color, size, movement. When you do that you lose the qualities nature originally intended. Colonial Spanish horses have not been bred for any specific purpose. They are as true to their origins as nature meant them to be. They are hearty, have incredibly excellent feet—they rarely need shoes—and their skeletal structure is made for work and long-distance riding. And they still have the innate intelligence and sensitivity to do any job.”

Originally from California, Stephanie came to Vermont in 1987 for a change of scenery and lifestyle. “I brought my skis with me and ended up in Stowe,” she says. Because horses had been such a big part of her life since childhood, she sought them out and landed a job working at Shaw Hill Farm in Moscow.

It wasn’t long before Stephanie met James Lockhart, a sculpture and educator who teaches at Hazen Union School in Hardwick. They married in 1992 and have two daughters, Tori and Eliza. While tending to the demands of motherhood, Stephanie became competitive in dressage and jumping, and in time became a freelance equestrienne instructor, coach, and trainer.

“Eventually I realized I didn’t like the type of relationship I had with horses. It seemed shallow. I felt I had lost a naturalness and focus of what the spirit of horses is about. I wanted a better way,” Stephanie explains. That was when she reconnected with natural horsemanship, the philosophy of working with horses by appealing to their individual and herd instincts.

Natural horsemanship is derived from observing wild horses in their natural environment, and resembles the relationships between horses and the ways they communicate with each other. The method helps the trainer create a bond with the horse, without using intimidating methods or threatening moves. “It was a skill I had naturally as a kid, and I loved that I was getting back to my roots of what horses meant to me,” Stephanie says.

When Stephanie first begins training a horse, everything she does is foundation work, or groundwork, where she is on the ground, walking and running alongside or ahead of the horse. She works with the horse “at liberty,” with no halter or rope. “That’s when you get the truth about your relationship with the horse,” she says. “In liberty

work, you are looking for a partnership. The horse will show it wants to be with you by following you. It becomes a more genuine relationship built on trust.”

Stephanie pursued natural horsemanship, consulting with a mentor in Oklahoma. She

ally own, and who is still with her today.

Adelantado came to Stephanie in an unusual and fortuitous way. Her daughter, Eliza, donated her birthday money to The Horse of the America’s Registry, and in return they entered her into a raffle. The



developed her skills and trained as many horses as possible. She uses the technique when teaching others how to train their own horses. In 2004 she began working for screenwriter John Fusco, managing his horse farm, Red Road Farm.

Fusco wrote the script for the Disney film *Hildago*, the story of a Spanish mustang stallion, which features Oscar, now a resident of The Center for America’s First Horse. It was through Fusco that Stephanie first met this special breed, and it didn’t take long for her to become completely smitten. She trained as many as 30 Colonial Spanish horses while working at Red Road Farm, including Adelantado, the first of many Colonial Spanish horses that Stephanie would eventu-

prize was a black colt named Adelantado. Eliza wasn’t the winner, but the girl who did win thought Adelantado was meant to be with Eliza and gifted him to her. “We all fell in love with Adelantado and wanted more like him,” says Stephanie.

As if she had rubbed a magic bottle, her wish came true. The people who owned and bred Adelantado owned many more horses. They recognized Stephanie’s talents and sent her four Colonial Spanish horses to train. Over the next two years she acquired 14 more, and had anywhere from 15 to 30 horses at a time that she trained at Red Road Farm. Many of the horses found new homes with other like-minded horse enthusiasts.

THE VISION

Sometimes people come to the realization they have a greater purpose. That knowledge may emerge at an early age or later in life. It might take them awhile to figure out exactly what the greater purpose is, but when they do their lives take on a whole new meaning. Colonial Spanish horses have led Stephanie to her own life’s greater purpose. It didn’t happen all at once, but when her purpose slowly shifted into focus, there was no reining her in.

“I wasn’t feeling fulfilled in my horse career,” she says. “I needed something else where I was contributing more. I knew there was something else I should be doing with horses, but didn’t know what it was.”

In 2008 she spent 10 months in New Mexico at Sand Hill Child Development Center doing equine-assisted psychotherapy. She took with her six of her own horses and worked with children of various ages who had emotional attachment disorders. “I was part of a team. I was the horse specialist and I worked with licensed psychotherapists,” Stephanie explains. “It was an incredibly emotional time. It gave us insight into what was going on with the kids on an emotional level. The horses were mirrors and metaphors, reflecting back a child’s behavior. I saw my own horses in a completely different light.”

The experience served to reinforce Stephanie’s belief that by combining natural horsemanship with the spirit and temperament of the

“These horses are so special because they have such a long history and they are survivors,” Jo says. “There is something spiritual about them. This is the breed that Native Americans rode on the Trail of Tears. Even if you are not a horse person, there’s something you feel immediately, a connection. They have a great gait and are a great ride. They are tactile and affectionate. They want to please, to give and take. Plus, they are easy keepers. They will survive on shrubs if they have to.”

Jo worked with Stephanie at Red Road Farm and has watched her dream evolve. “The center is a huge undertaking,” Jo says. “We have been incredibly fortunate to have the support of many people who appreciate what we are doing and the Johnson community has been very embracing.”

In April 2010, Gilbert Lopes and Susan Aldrich donated 70 acres they own in Johnson to the center in a long-term lease agreement. This generous gift has enabled the organization to turn Stephanie’s vision into reality. After acquiring the land, volunteers helped construct fences and shelters. Soon after, Stephanie moved 13 horses to the property.

“Stephanie has a profound effect on the horses,” Jo explains. “To her, everything is about the herd dynamics. I have seen her take a lawn chair and set it up in a field and sit and watch how the horses interact for hours.”

This spring, the center erected an indoor arena that will serve as a year-round training area. “Now that we have an arena we can really go to town. It’s just going to get better and better,” says Jo. They have applied for non-profit status so they can write grants, receive donations, and establish community programs. Their long-term objective is to offer any sort of experience anyone could want, from human enrichment and healing, to learning how to ride, to bringing your own horses and exploring the trails on the property.

“At the end of the day, it’s about having a center that people can come to, to see and enjoy Vermont’s beauty, and to see Colonial Spanish horses in a beautiful habitat and to help them thrive,” says Jo. “It’s about keeping the Colonial Spanish breed healthy, growing the breed, and promoting it through education. Anyone who takes time out from his or her day to visit the center will come away changed and moved. You can learn a lot about humanity by watching these horses.”

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Preceding pages: Stephanie heads out of the barn for a ride. At the center, from left: Tori, holding Hidalgo, Stephanie, and Eliza Lockhart.

Colonial Spanish horse, she could make a difference in people’s lives.

When she returned to Vermont, Stephanie did equine work with children at Laraway School in Johnson “It became clear to me that this is what I want to do. I want to offer equine programs to people who want and need them, regardless of their financial restrictions.” To do that she would need a place where she could keep and train horses, give demonstrations, and hold seminars, workshops, and classes.

THE FOUNDATION

As Stephanie’s vision of The Center began to take shape, she realized the best way to help it grow was to form a non-profit. She brought together a formidable board of directors comprised of nine women with vastly different talents and one common thread: their love of horses.

Jo Sabel Courtney of Stowe is the center’s vice president and leads the marketing and public relations. She has been involved in the preservation of the Colonial Spanish horse since 2005.

The Center for America’s First Horse

Kids Natural Horsemanship summer program 2011:

June 27 - July 1, July 11 - 15, July 25 - 29, August 8 - 12

Solutions for You and Your Problem Horse clinic: June 18 - 19

Woman and Horses Vermont Getaway weekend:

July 15 - 17 & August 19 - 21

Equine and Arts Festival: September, date TBD

Dancing with Horses workshop: September, date TBD

To learn more about The Center for America’s First Horse and the programs it offers, go to centerforamericasfirsthorse.org. Tours are available by appointment. Call 802-730-5400 or email stephanie@centerforamericasfirsthorse.org.