

Instructor of the Month

Melissa Deal
Burgaw, North Carolina

CURRENTLY

As the owner and resident trainer of Victory Land Dressage, I do everything within my power to help horses and their people win in their lives together. It isn't just about the ribbons or gold medals here; it's about creating a refuge for horse and human. It's about helping them share the best of one another. It's about guiding them in how to communicate effectively to build a relationship that meets both of their needs.

Joy is best experienced when comforts - mental, emotional and physical - exist. My life is about creating comfort. I am passionate about the relationships that I have with each gentle horse and thoughtful rider and the relationships that I help them create with one another. It is a privilege to be allowed to influence others. It is my goal to assist them in having happy, sound, safe horses in a kind and soulful manner. And, it is my job to help horses and their people smile from within as they grow together.



I am committed to learning from every horse I touch. My greatest contribution as an instructor is to facilitate the same learning in others. I see the horse as the true teacher. I see myself as the interpreter or liaison between people and their horses. Clients generally come to me with a specific challenge. It is my sincere hope that they leave with the ability to shape behaviors (so that the challenge can be viewed as a priceless teaching tool) and with a heart full of so much more than training and riding skills. It's my goal to foster more compassion in clients' hearts. I want to nurture a greater love for the horse and aid riders in having a deeper understanding of themselves and their abilities. It is my goal to instill a new way of looking at all that life has to offer, both with horses and as a whole. The safe and effective teaching and training methods that accomplish these often elusive qualities include using a blend of positive reinforcement or reward based training; classical dressage; horsemanship; and obstacle/trick training to build confidence and trust between horses and people. I really hone in on the understanding of horse behavior/psychology and physiology, which are interchangeably and permanently connected. It is paramount that the stress levels of horses and people are kept to a minimum for optimal learning, healing and growth to occur. I have embraced the methods listed above. However, life is a constant teacher so my methods are always morphing as I discover yet one more nugget leading to another step on my path toward clarity and harmony.

EXPERIENCE

I have a wide range of experience in the equine industry: from working for Olympians and classical masters and teaching in collegiate equine programs, to judging and instructing equestrians from adults to tiny ones (complete with pig tails on ponies). I am eternally thankful for these experiences. My gratitude for the people and horses that provided them is endless.

What I learned from these experiences greatly contributes to all that I do including my involvement with ARIA. I have been certified by ARIA since 1999 in three disciplines. This certification has been a great source of pride for me since that time and I appreciate the people at ARIA who made it possible.

In 2015, a book, *Compassionate Equestrian*, by Dr. Allen Schoen and Susan Gordon (discovered because of a horse who has been a great teacher of mine) led to a unique opportunity allowing me to grow the interests mentioned above into further reality. The book was life changing for me. I pledged as a Compassionate Equestrian in 2015 and our



farm was recognized as one of the first to do so. On the heels of that recognition, my most recent passion has been founding the regional group, Coastal Carolina Compassionate Equestrians. Our local group is part of a larger international movement spurred by the book. The group of like-minded equestrians that meets monthly motivates and supports us all to view our interactions with horses and people in a new light: one of love, generosity, and tolerance based upon science and heartfelt emotions. I can't say enough positive things about the shared spirit of the attendees. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity

to serve them by providing a monthly educational gathering that includes meet and greet time, book chapter discussion and an equine expert presentation at no charge to the community.

Another milestone in my career occurred in January of 2016, when the United States Horsemanship Association (USRHA) awarded the Kenneth R Westcott Stewardship (of the horse) Award to me. The USRHA is an association holding high standards for horsemanship and the support and knowledge that I have gained from them over the years is invaluable. My current educational endeavors include the In Hand Therapy Course by Jean Luc Cornille and the Science of Motion. I am enrolled in the Connection Training courses taught by Shawna Karrasch and Hannah Weston (highly recommend). I take lessons at every possible opportunity, have begun showing again recently. I am an avid reader of books on the subjects of business, improving my character, communication and equestrian skills.

HOBBIES

One of the ways that I became involved with Compassionate Equestrians was by writing book reviews and also reviewing some additional materials written by one of the authors of the Compassionate Equestrian to help bolster their mission of compassion. Reading and writing are some of my favorite activities and they are especially enjoyable when horses are involved!

Other than that, my only real hobbies involve water- on it, in it, or around it- and include but are not limited to paddle boarding, boating, swimming, fishing and playing on the gritty shores of any beach, river or lake. My daddy nurtured not only a love of animals in me, but also a love of the outdoors, particularly water.

Family is a big item on list of the best ways to spend my time and I consider it blessed responsibility. I am super fortunate to have a husband who supports me fully in the horses. He can wrap a leg, pack and drive a trailer and tack a horse up as well as most professional grooms. He's definitely one of life's greatest gifts!

My husband and I are highly involved in providing clean water to those in need. We provide well water and other related items to communities in South America and Asia. Often the people needing water are walking many miles through dangerous territory to obtain only the amount of water that they can carry, and they certainly need our assistance. Currently, we are involved in the Water Challenge Project. We are challenging our home town of Burgaw NC to forego buying beverages for two weeks. During that time, participants are to save the money that they would normally spend on beverages and donate it to this project. Our business will match the donated funds. We are really excited about this as it is our goal to give clean water to 1 million people in our life time! Many animals will also benefit, among them equines, of course! To learn more, see:

<https://thewaterproject.org/community/profile/cape-fear-drilling-service-water-project-challenge>

TIP

If I could pass on just one helpful hint, it would be this: listen to your clients. When you think you have heard them completely, listen more. Read between the lines. Hear what they mean, not what they say. Be careful not to discount what they tell you as the ranting of the inexperienced recreational rider or the jaded attitude of the ring sour horse, for example. Don't let the lack of skill, ignorance or the pinned ears skew your hearing. Really seek to understand what they have to say. Remember that the person who spends the most time with their horse and/or their body knows it best. It may be up to you to interpret the language they choose to find the golden thread of truth. Finally, take care to listen to all that the horse has to show you and share with you and carefully analyze all that you observe. If you truly seek to understand them both, you will learn much; and therefore be able to help them to a degree far beyond what you could have done on your own. *I encourage you to withhold judgment in every circumstance and to listen fully with all of your senses...with your whole being!* This is one of the greatest factors in our ability to be both truly compassionate and effective as instructors. (If I can help fan the flame of your

desire to help others on their equestrian journey, please don't hesitate to reach out to me.)

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