



2021 SENIOR ESSAY AWARD WINNER

Elizabeth Larson



Elizabeth with AJ, a pony club mount.
Photo courtesy of Traci Stout

Just past six on a Saturday morning in January, donned in my riding clothes and a parka, I stood ringside setting jumps and directing warm-up riders.

Leading and organizing one of the first IHSA horse shows hosted by Willamette University's newly minted equestrian team was an opportunity to wear many hats. Without an established riding facility associated with our team hosting an IHSA show meant making hundreds of phone calls to find horse donations, jumps and equipment. These logistical challenges developed my leadership and communication skills more thoroughly than any of my college coursework.

I came from a ranching family with a background in horses, so IHSA offered me my first formal showing experience. For someone with close to decades of riding experience, but very limited showing experience due to financial constraints, this opportunity was both exhilarating and gratifying. Finally, all of my time spent riding unruly ponies, fresh off-the-track- thoroughbreds and unbroke mustangs translated into tangible skills showcased through IHSA: my ability to successfully ride unfamiliar horses.

Ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, IHSA competitions were a space for me to examine and acknowledge my own privilege. Although I worked very hard for the equestrian opportunities in my life, this did not negate the fact that I had ready access to horses at home. After moving away to college, I began to realize what this childhood background really meant to me. My small liberal arts college introduced me to students who primarily came from urban backgrounds. Many of my teammates had never been around horses. It brought me great joy to see them develop their confidence and horsemanship skills. Once I began to reflect upon my good fortune to have grown up with horses, other privileges became more readily apparent to me. My white skin. My gender identity. The college education of my parents. The cognitive therapies I received in first grade to treat my dyslexia which then allowed me to excel academically. I'm ashamed to admit how difficult it was to fully acknowledge all the advantages I carried. Over time, I realized this recognition was a first crucial step towards developing greater equity and inclusion in the horse world and beyond.

Reflecting on the past year, I'm saddened that competitive IHSA events were so limited due to the pandemic. Qualifying for postseason competition was a goal I had been working towards steadily. The disappointments of this past year have been tempered by my continued delight in working with horses and finding ways for these amazing creatures to become more accessible to others. I believe that the pleasure of horses is a joy best shared. With this in mind, I worked to make our team a more accessible space by launching a fundraising campaign. One of the greatest barriers to IHSA team participation is the expense of weekly riding lessons. These funds will support a need-based scholarship for a future member.

I'm so thankful for every moment of my IHSA experience over the last four years. The friendships I've formed have been the closest of my college years. The program has been key to developing my time management, confidence and creative problem-solving skills; capabilities I will carry forward into graduate school. On a personal level, I plan to continue making horses more accessible to others through education, fundraising and outreach. There is still much to be done!



Elizabeth riding her OTTB mare "Kat" at the Oregon Region Pony Club 2017 Eventing Rally.
Photo by Kelvin Watkins Photography