

Turning a Lifelong Love Into a Career

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Nettie Liburt and Belle take a break from making important discoveries in the world of equine research.

I'm a barn rat, and always will be! Most "horse people" know that's not a four-legged pest, but a horse-crazy kid that hangs around the barn doing chores every minute of their free time just to be near horses.

It started when a neighbor invited my mom to bring me (then a spry two-year-old) along to feed her horses. It was love at first sight! Lessons ensued, and I was soon lucky enough to have my first pony. My parents jokingly hoped I'd grow out of my "horse phase" (since horses aren't inexpensive), but now they're thrilled I didn't.

I'm fortunate to have owned a horse for most of my life. I still work hard to keep it, and I compete in hunter/jumper shows as much as I can. Horses are part of who I am, a feeling that has been confirmed many times over. I've worked in a few different industries, including broadcasting, but I never found quite what I was looking for.

Five years ago, I had a wonderful chestnut Thoroughbred mare. Eminent Appeal was my mount for the better part of my junior competitive career, elegant and kind with a heart of gold. She developed a few unusual medical problems over time: allergies to several species of trees and grass; tendonitis and Cushing's syndrome; and respiratory infections.

"Emmy" was my true inspiration to attend graduate school. In taking care of her, I became increasingly curious about treatments, sports rehabilitation, exercise physiology and nutrition. My undergraduate degree in psychology lacked some core science courses, so I had a long road to travel to achieve acceptance into graduate school.

I quit my job in network news, and back to school I went. Dr. Karyn Malinowski was an integral part of my journey. She advised me about courses I needed and served as a mentor. I successfully made up the missing classes and was admitted to Rutgers in Fall 2003. Dr. Ken McKeever taught me the importance of sound study design and scientifically credible research.

No one could have prepared me for the experience of graduate school, but it is one I value and will never forget! I gained a whole new perspective on research, and an exponentially greater appreciation for what horses are capable of, how much heart they have, and how willing they are to work for us. My master's degree work, completed in May 2005, investigated the effects of cranberry and ginger extracts on inflammation and other markers of exercise performance.

While completing my thesis, I felt in my heart that I wasn't finished. I took a break from school, but knew I would return to pursue my Ph.D. I sought the opinion of many academic equine researchers and industry professionals who all advised me to "go for it!" I am thrilled to be back in Dr. McKeever's lab, and I feel like I've hit the ground running. Things are already busy, with many learning opportunities ahead.

Rutgers is truly a top equine research university which I have come to greatly appreciate. We are privileged to have a climate-controlled treadmill lab complete with facilities for immediate sample processing. The equine faculty are renowned for their research, and the support system among students and teachers is invaluable.

I may have not taken the most direct route to get here, but I have no regrets. I've worked in other industries that I found interesting, but unfulfilling. People often ask me, "Are you going to be a vet?" No, not a vet, but a scientist who works to provide sound information that helps vets better treat their equine patients and horse people become more educated. Whether that leads me to a position in academia, industry or independent consulting remains to be seen. As I develop my research project over the next few months, I will keep my goals and the best interest of the horses in mind, as I always have. The challenge will be great, but the rewards will be greater!