

Welcome to Mule School
By Helen T. Hertz

Whether it's a university campus, a vocational college or an elementary school, a place of learning has a certain atmosphere. It's a place that fosters curiosity, nurtures progress and opens minds. It's a place to grow. That's certainly the case at Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colorado, where Meredith Hodges has trained scores of mules and dozens of riders and where, today, she's sharing her knowledge of longears with an ever-growing number of visitors.

Guests who visit inevitably have plenty of questions for the mule expert, and that suits Meredith just fine. She sees the tours as an opportunity for educational outreach and believes the more people know about mules and donkeys the better. On a recent sunny summer morning, a group of 10 or so visitors—some local, some from out of state—arrived for the Lucky Three experience. Lucky Three staff members greeted them all and showed them into the most luxurious tack room you can imagine, complete with tasseled drapery, artwork and video monitor. After a brief introduction, the group watched an entertaining video about the ranch, the mules and how Meredith came to make these amazing animals her life's work. Meredith, herself, then welcomed her guests, and the questions began. One man pointed to a photo on the wall of Meredith and her dressage champion, Lucky Three Sundowner, executing a crisp pattern.

"Do you breed specifically to get a mule to do that?" he asked.

"That's best," Meredith replied, "though most mules have an overall athleticism that makes them well-suited for any number of different events. That's why they say the mule is always better than the horse he came out of."

"Do you still show?" a woman asked.

"Not any more. Running a business, giving these tours and working with my correspondence students is a full-time job," Meredith answered. "But even though some of my animals haven't been ridden regularly in while, I know I could go get on them and they'd be solid. They've all had the good, foundational training that I teach, and I trust them just as they trust me."

After a little more discussion, the group headed out into the sunshine for the tour. They strolled the grounds near the big house, getting up close to some of the beautiful bronze sculpture Meredith has installed on the property, and then headed for the barns. Several of the mules, excited for company, neigh-brayed their welcome as everyone moved inside. Meredith opened each stall door one-by one and introduced each mule to the group. Again the questions flowed:

"How long do they live?" one woman asked.

"Some of mine are well into their 30s," Meredith said, "and with proper care and feeding they can easily go into their 40s."

"What do they eat," another inquired.

"It's very important to feed these guys the right way," said Meredith. "We only let them out to graze for half a day, so they don't get fat, and crimped oats are the best for them."

"There aren't any flies or bugs in here," one fellow remarked.

“That’s because the stalls are so clean,” a woman noted.

After visiting with the mules, the group boarded two motorized carts and travelled farther afield to see more of the statuary in Meredith’s amazing Longears Sculpture Park and to visit the brood mares that have served Meredith so well over the years and now enjoy retirement.

Toward the end of the tour, as each child sat astride a bronze mule for a photo op, one of the women approached Meredith.

“You know, I’ve watched your show on TV all these years, and I couldn’t believe when I e-mailed you that you e-mailed me back personally!”

Meredith laughed. “I always answer all my e-mail and phone messages myself,” she said. “My whole reason for doing this is to share what I believe to be the best information on how to care for and train these animals, so I have to be accessible to the people who want to know.”

The group returned to the tack room to pick up brochures and Jasper the Mule post cards for the kids and to chat with Meredith. They were excited about what they’d seen and learned and eager to tell some of their own mule stories. Each would leave with a better understanding of longears and new information to share with family and friends. “School” was out for the day, and tomorrow, new “students” would arrive.

For more information about tours of Lucky Three Ranch, please visit www.LuckyThreeRanch.com or call 800-816-7566.