

Jasper the Mule Takes to the Air

Meredith Hodges brings "Jasper: The Story of a Mule" to RFD-TV

by Helen Taylor Hertz

By now, many of you know Jasper, the lovable young mule who romps through Meredith Hodges's children's books, "Jasper: the story of a Mule" and "Jasper: a Christmas Caper." But whether he's by now a family friend or new to you, you'll have plenty of opportunity to spend time with him in the next few months. Created by Meredith and illustrated by Tennessee mule artist Bonnie Shields, Jasper the character, inspired by a letter Meredith once wrote to herself from an imaginary mule colt, has already captured the imagination of thousands of young readers and many more will have the opportunity to meet him soon. This month the Telly Award-winning animated video of "Jasper: the Story of Mule" premiere on RFD-TV (check local listings) and Jasper will have the honor of serving as Grand Marshal of the Bishop Mule days Celebration Parade.

After nearly 30 years spent breeding, training, showing and promoting mules and donkeys, Meredith Hodges is taking her message on mules to kids. Last year, Hodges published her first children's book, "Jasper: "The Story of a Mule," the lovable mule colt: The Story of a Mule," her first children's book, is now a Telly Award-winning animated video airing on RFD-TV (check local listings), Have you heard? "Jasper" the mule is coming to RFD-TV in May. Following on the heels of Meredith's children's book, "Jasper: The Story of a Mule," the lovable young mule will star in his own animated children's program.

"Jasper: The Story of a Mule," will air several times in May and into the summer (check your local listing). Meredith also plans to make the program available on DVD, and by this June, "Jasper" fans will be able to purchase their own copy of the show through MediaTech Productions. The DVD will offer plenty of extras, including a making of documentary called, "Jasper: A Labor of Love," a blooper reel, and training shots with Meredith's own Lucky Three Ranch mules. In addition, Meredith will release a "Jasper" CD featuring country/western stars Riders in the Sky and Mindy Ellis performing music from the show and other great tunes. The CD will also be available in June, through MediaTech Productions, 800-816-7566, and on Meredith's web site at www.luckythreeranch.com.

RFD-TV, billed as Rural America's Most Important Network, currently airs Meredith's popular training programs, so it seemed the ideal place to premiere "Jasper." Meredith has tapped a wealth of talent to create this heart-warming tale. Narrated by TV and film star Lee Horsley and animated by "Peanuts" animator Bill Melendez, with the careful direction of illustrator and Tennessee Mule artist Bonnie Shields, "Jasper" offers a welcome alternative in an era when parents find it increasingly difficult to find appropriate television programming for children. With its powerful message of love and understanding, the show is destined to become a family favorite.

A Celebrity in the Making

"Jasper" has already found a following among mule lovers, and fans will get a chance to meet him at Bishop Mule Days, where he will have the honor of serving as Grand Marshal for the Mule Days Parade. "Jasper," Bonnie and Meredith will be on hand

Saturday to visit with the folks, and the “Jasper” books and other products will be available for purchase at Bonnie Shields’ booth through the week.

Later this summer, Meredith plans to continue the “Jasper” celebration with a live performance by Riders in the Sky. The concert will take place August 11, at the Ellis Ranch in Loveland, Colo. A percentage of the proceeds will go to Hearts & Horses, a charitable organization dedicated to helping individuals with disabilities through therapeutic experiences with equines. Meredith is an outspoken supporter of Hearts & Horses, and this year, the organization’s Therapeutic Riding Center will honor their beloved mule Kate as “Horse” of the Year.

August 11, promises to be a memorable day. In the morning Meredith will unveil a life-size bronze of her prized donkey Little Jack Horner and herself, sculpted by celebrated Tennessee artist Bonnie Shields. The day will also include a public tour of Lucky Three Ranch and Meredith’s one-of-a-kind Longears Sculpture Park. Guests will have an opportunity to meet the people and voices behind “Jasper,” and the “Jasper” mascot will be on hand as well. In the evening Riders in the Sky will take the stage for a concert under the stars. If you live in the area and would like ticket information, please visit www.luckythreeranch.com.

A Legacy of Dedication

Meredith continues to move at a mind-boggling pace, but even with such a full plate, she keeps her focus and her mission clear. As many of you know, she has dedicated herself to breeding, training and promoting mules and donkeys for more than 25 years. No one has done more to elevate the stature of these animals and teach people how to properly care for and train them.

Since the publication of her first book, “Training Mules and Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Longears,” Meredith has written five more, including her latest “A Guide To Raising and Showing Mules,” an ideal resource for the 4-H project and beginners. Ten training videos and 32 half-hour television shows serve as the foundation for Meredith’s unique mule and donkey-training correspondence program, and customers know she’s only a phone call or e-mail away with answers to their training questions. As Meredith says, “If these people are going to take the time to train their animals the right way, the least I can do is make myself available to help them.”

For years Meredith’s father, cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, encouraged her to write a children’s book on her favorite subject. In 2003 she heeded Dad’s advice, introducing young people everywhere to the wonders of mules with, “Jasper: The Story of a Mule.” Meredith’s words and Bonnie Shields’ charming illustrations capture the spirit of a young mule as he faces some of life’s toughest tests. “Jasper: A Christmas Caper” is the second book in the series, and more holiday sequels will follow.

It’s a fact that mules have often suffered because people misunderstand them. Education is the key, Meredith says, and children are an ideal audience.

“The best thing I can do for mules and donkeys is to introduce them to children in a positive way. If I can reach the kids early, before they buy into the stereotypes and prejudiced misconceptions, then maybe I can help them appreciate the special gifts of these, and all, animals.”

Wise words from a woman who continues to find creative ways to shine a light on mules and donkeys. For more information about Meredith Hodges and “Jasper the Mule,” visit www.LuckyThreeRanch.com or www.jasperthemule.com, or call (800) 816-7567.

