

# A Place of Introspection



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It has been nearly ten years since Kari Fulmek and Carolyn Charles first set up their equine assisted learning business, Equine Connection. "It was three years at least of crying and overspending, and really bashing our heads against brick walls," Carolyn says.

"But, you don't really bash your head against walls unless you know: this is a goer," interjects Jane. Both women are speaking to me from Willowwood Stables, the home of Jane Hemingway-Mohr and the base of her equestrian business in the northern suburbs of Sydney.

Today, Equine Connection is a truly global organisation. Founded in Canada, Carolyn and Kari are in Sydney to complete Jane's training as an instructor for equine assisted learning (EAL) facilitators. They've had participants from the United Kingdom, New Zealand and as far afield as Dubai, Korea, Bosnia and Herzegovina. But, it was, by no means, an easy beginning.

"I wanted all my life to work with horses," Kari tells me. "How can I do that if I'm not a horse trainer, if I don't know how to teach people to ride?" The answer came to her in the form of a magazine advert for an EAL facilitator training program: the Equine Assisted Learning BuildingBlock Program™. She spent the next year training as a facilitator to be able to run EAL programs in her own community, under the guidance of Tamara Mackinnon of the Academy of Equine Assisted Learning.

Carolyn was working with Kari at the time for the Strathmore Agricultural Society in Alberta, Canada, organising the famous Strathmore Heritage Day Stampede. Kari asked Carolyn to come out and see what EAL was all about. Carolyn had little experience with horses, although she had always found them beautiful. "It didn't really occur to me there was so much more they could do and so much more they could be."

She observed a youth program in progress, a facilitator guiding young people through the session with their horses. "I was hearing the stories from the leaders about where these kids had come from and the kid that I saw in front of me working with the horse was not the same troubled youth I was hearing these stories about. Something just clicked for me in that moment."

Jane Hemingway-Mohr, instructor, senior facilitator and owner of Leading Edge Life Skills with her Australian Stock Horse mare, Opal. Opal and Jane have been partners for ten years. Her Golden Retriever, Boston, is in the background.



**IMAGE A:** Making a plan together with Australian Stock Horse gelding, Bart, on how to tackle the obstacle

**IMAGE B:** Communication is key. That's right! says Kylie, the Hannoverian mare.

**IMAGE C:** Participants are briefed on how horses communicate and about the program they will be doing that day before entering the arena with the horses.

**IMAGE D:** Equine Connection's Carolyn Charles (left) and founder Kari Fulmek (right) give a horse body language and safety demonstration with Paint gelding, Vinnie.

**IMAGE E:** The plan in action with Bart.



*"What we're all here for is to help another person. And then to be able to do it with the power of the horse - it's humbling."*

Though her official title is Director of Sales and Marketing, before long, Carolyn was training as a facilitator too. The two women began running programs for corporate clients, youth groups and women's groups, using the natural body language of horses to teach life skills, like clear communication, to their participants. After several years, they expanded into instructing facilitators, enabling more people to bring EAL to their communities.

"We did a lot of things that were wrong and we did a lot of things that were a lot harder than they needed to be, so when we started doing the instructor portion, we decided that we wanted to set people up for success," Carolyn explains.

It's what makes Equine Connection's facilitator training program so unique: the business element. Their courses not only teach effective methods for EAL, they teach practical business skills to enable their students to put their best foot forward, giving them advice on website development, social media and marketing.

"The ladies have put in all their blood, sweat and tears from all the years that they were getting it up and running," Jane explains. She is one of their past students, now the head of Equine Connection's Sydney campus. Over a week in February and March, Kari and Carolyn were instructing a new class of facilitators alongside Jane, and handing over the reins to her for the Australian schools from now on.

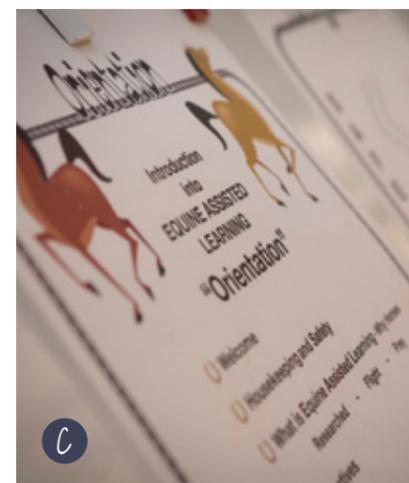
"I have been involved with horses most of my life and it was always a goal to live with my horses," Jane tells me. She finally got her own equestrian facility six years ago and it altered her attitude to her horses completely. "Having lived with them has really changed me," she says. "It wasn't all about riding and 'I'm only a good horse person if I'm a good rider' any more; it totally shifted."

In 2015, Jane took part in an Equine Connection course and became a qualified facilitator, setting up her own EAL business, Leading Edge Life Skills. Her clients include corporate groups who come to her to learn about teamwork and communication, as well as youth and women's groups. "For me, it's all about the horses," she says. "I just want everyone to know how much they can teach us."

All their horses are tested for temperament before they can be used in EAL sessions. "They often have a story, it seems and people connect to that story," Carolyn says. "We like to select horses with life experience," Jane adds.

The horses she uses have been outgrown by her children, but Jane found a new purpose for them in EAL. "They're family members and they've done so much for us, so it just seemed like a natural progression for them to move into this."

The facilitators do regular groundwork with their horses to ensure they have the essential skills and only well-rested horses are used in their sessions. "They take on a lot emotionally," says Jane. For safety reasons, each facilitator can supervise no more than two horses in a session at any given time. "You can't have your eyes everywhere," Jane says.





**IMAGE A:** Hmm, what now? Problem solving with Vinnie.

**IMAGE B:** Stretched to the limit! Opal doesn't mind.

**IMAGE C:** We got this, says Calvin, the Clydesdale-cross gelding.

**IMAGE D:** Congratulations to the successful candidates of the Equine Connection Equine Assisted Learning Building Block™ Program Facilitator Course. These candidates came from all over Australia and New Zealand.



"There is no such thing as a 100% bombproof horse," Carolyn adds. "We know that they react to stimuli, and that they are a prey animal and a flight animal and, for these reasons, we are able to understand to a certain extent how they are speaking to us. A horse is a horse and they speak like a horse wherever they are in the world."

It is this universal language that enables the facilitators to communicate their objectives so effectively to their clients. "It's changed me to see the effect they have on non-horsey people," says Jane. "Your clients come in, they know nothing about horses. [But] they're there to learn life skills."

"Absolutely," Carolyn agrees. "When a horse stops moving, they take it to heart. So we say 'Okay, how come the horse isn't moving?' And they know that it's something going on with their team because the horse is part of their team. They always go to a place of introspection to figure out what's going on with them and how can they change it; then we, as facilitators, guide them to the objective."

They have seen horses have a truly profound effect on their participants, and it's clear that witnessing this has profoundly affected all three women as well. Carolyn tells me about Gloria, a schoolgirl suffering from bullying, whose horses were working so well with her the other kids would steal them from her - only to find they didn't work as beautifully for them. Finally, Gloria found the courage to say no to the other kids and hold her ground with her horse. "We're sitting there in the background saying 'Yes, go Gloria!'" Carolyn laughs.

At the debriefing session, Gloria surprised them all by talking eloquently about what she had achieved that day and received a standing ovation from her classmates. "I think, thus far, in our career of EAL it's one we look back to all the time as just being magical. This little girl came from being so quiet and shy, and bullied to standing up for herself and [finding her] self-esteem."

The ladies of Equine Connection take particular pride in the programs they run specifically for women. "The program somehow resonates with women," Jane says. "There's a magic and a beauty to women and horses," Carolyn adds. "Every little girl wants a pony, right?"

"I think that a lot of us women have been at the point where you felt like you didn't have a voice, that you didn't know how to move forward, that you were stuck," says Carolyn. "Self-esteem is one of those things that nobody can build for you. You have to build it for yourself. But, I can tell you that leading a 1,500 pound animal and having them follow you at the end of the day builds self-esteem."

"So, when we see women come through and say 'Today I found my voice. I know my next step in life.' It's just - there's nothing better than that, as far as a career goes."

"I can't think of anything better to do. Sorry to my children and husband," Jane laughs. "I think that the greatest thing that we can do in this life is give back to somebody else," Carolyn adds. "Being able to see change happen every day... It's never boring."

Kari echoes her sentiment. "What we're all here for is to help another person. And then to be able to do it with the power of the horse - it's humbling."