

Touched

Psychotherapist Melisa Pearce uses her Paints in a novel way—to teach personal growth skills

Article and Photography by REBECCA OVERTON

The young woman had been promoted at work, but her first week on the job turned out to be a disaster. Her employees, who had been her co-workers before the promotion, paid little attention to her requests.

But after working a horse in a round pen during one of Melisa Pearce's seminars at Lil Bit North Ranch in Longmont, Colorado, the woman returned to her office, and, after a staff meeting, her employees began to respond more positively to her directions.

"By working in the round pen, she learned how to clarify her intention and solidify her belief that she could make the horse move," explained Pearce.

"When she went into the staff meeting, she applied the same principles she used in the round pen, and the shift in her attitude caused her employees to see her in a different light."

A self-described success coach and relationship expert, Pearce is a longtime equestrienne who uses her Paints in motivational programs.

No, it's not the typical way Paint enthusiasts utilize their horses. It's an example of one woman's ingenuity and a novel way Paints can be used to help people.

Not that Pearce hasn't followed the same road many Paint Horse owners travel. A veteran horsewoman from Tempe, Arizona, Pearce continues to breed and show Paints.

Her 1985 sorrel overo stallion, Go Robin Bar, is a World Champion All-Around Horse who also holds Championships in Working Cow Horse and

Utility Pleasure Driving. The APHA Champion also earned a Performance Versatility Award and six Reserves in halter. Many of his get have been successful in the show pen, too.

But Pearce, who has worked as a psychotherapist for more than 10 years, found a novel way to blend her love of horses with her work in counseling. For individuals and corporations, she designs motivational and personal growth programs that are centered around Paints.

These are not your garden-variety blueprints on how to improve your life and relationships. Neither are they riding classes. The programs demonstrate how horsemanship skills and equine behavior can be used to improve human relationships, as well as to define and achieve goals.

Seminar titles include Corraling Your Power Team, a one-day event for groups and corporations, and Harness the HorsePower Within, a two-day program that teaches individuals how to tap their potential.

Another two-day event, Horsin' Around, helps teenagers find direction in their life and clarify their values.

The newest program, Touched By A Horse, is a five-day luxury retreat for women that offers a

Magic moment: Horses have much to teach us about ourselves, says Melisa Pearce, shown here with A Powerbar. The gelding was sired by World Champion Go Robin Bar.

By A Horse





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Driving force: Pearce and Go Robin Bar hold a World Championship in Utility Pleasure Driving, which they earned while Pearce lived in Cave Creek, Arizona.



Back to the barn: The Pearces' 13-year-old daughter, Molly, helps at the ranch and shows her bay tobiano mare, Ima Foxy Ghost.

chance to unwind and explore personal issues. For \$5,000, participants receive Pearce's psychological insight, demonstrations of horsemanship skills, hands-on riding in an arena, a massage, specially prepared food and four nights at a small, elegant inn.

Prices for other programs begin at \$199 per person for a one-day workshop on goals. Pearce also custom-designs programs for specific businesses.

The seminars are presented at Lil Bit North Ranch, the 42-acre facility Pearce shares with her

13-year-old daughter, Molly.

Melisa's son, Cody, a 23-year-old professional time trial cyclist who competes nationally, lives on the ranch six months each year.

Located on the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, the ranch sits two hours northwest of Denver. This is a working ranch, with a 16-stall barn, a 10-stall mare motel, breeding lab, a heated indoor arena, several round pens, and a gift shop that offers equine supplies.

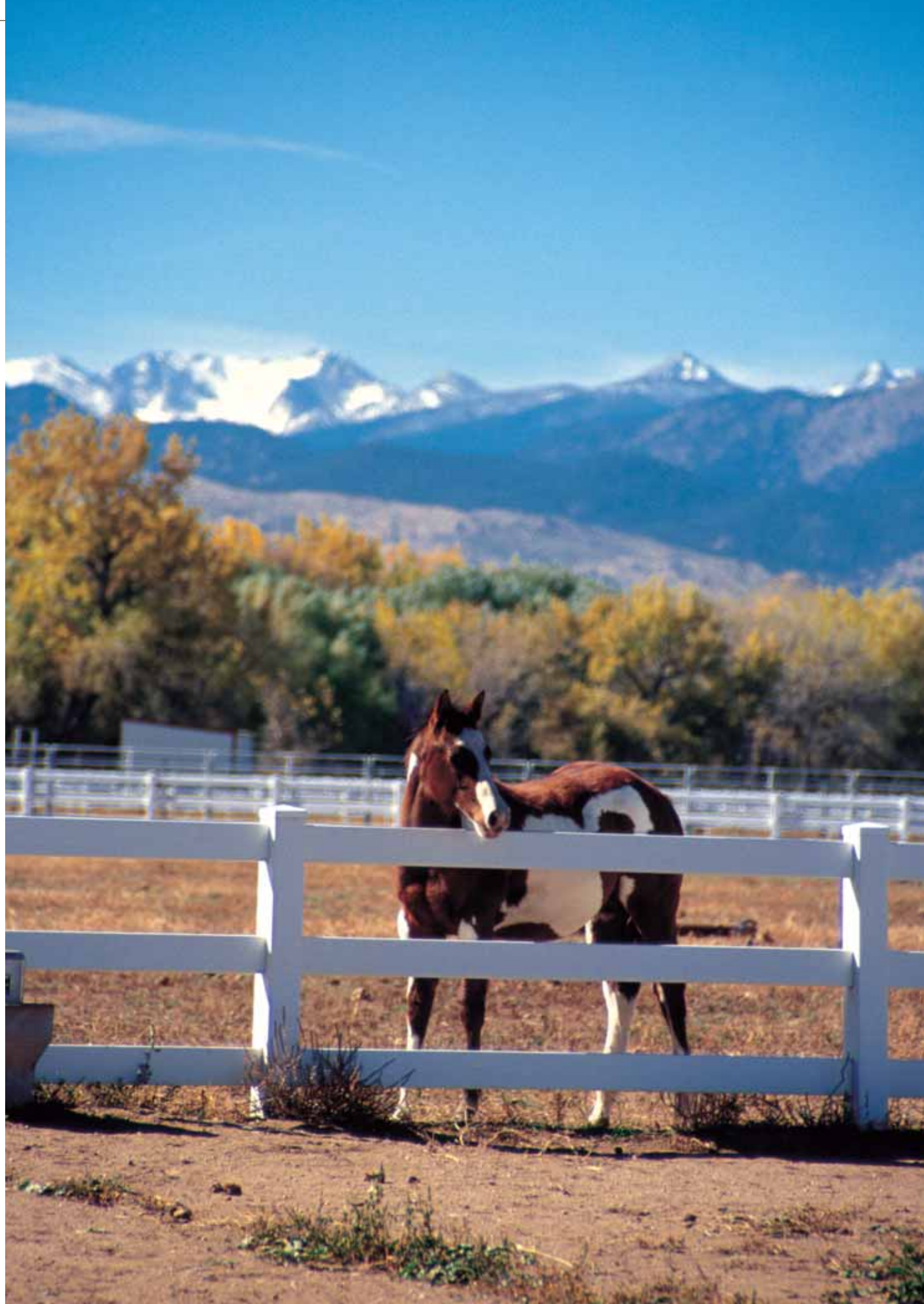
More than 40 Paint Horses fill the paddocks and pastures framed by the snow-dusted Rocky Mountains. As Canada geese call to one another as they wing their way through the crisp morning air, the ranch is a picture of tranquility.

Program players

Inside the arena, Pearce provides the psychological expertise for the programs, occasionally referring to the teachings of personal growth guru Anthony Robbins, a "life coach" to professional athletes and Fortune 500 company executives.

A large sign that reads, "Your identity shapes

Rocky Mountain tranquility: Lil Bit North Ranch, located in Longmont, Colorado, is home to more than 40 Paint Horses like the one seen here.





Practical application: Joby Priest, Lil Bit North's trainer, coaches Linda Elliot on a trail course during a Touched By A Horse retreat. Linda is riding Harmony Bar, one of the ranch's Paints.

your destiny," stretches along one side of the 95-by-195-foot arena.

"Horses can teach us so much about ourselves," Pearce noted. "The partnership between horse and rider is kind of like a marriage, and, like a marriage, when it doesn't work, it isn't pretty."

Pearce's partner and trainer, Joby Priest, demonstrates and explains horsemanship skills during the programs. The 24-year-old from Clovis, New Mexico, graduated in 1997 with honors from Lamar Community College in Lamar, Colorado, where he earned an associate degree in horse training and management.

While in college, Priest earned the National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) Novice Horse Open year-end award in New Mexico.

A professional trainer for six years, he works with horses in all disciplines, but he especially enjoys reining. Last December, he showed Ima Dynamite Doll, who the Pearces own, at the NRHA Futurity.

Working with horses provides good examples of how to achieve goals, Pearce said. She and Priest sometimes use trail courses to explain the concept in seminars.

"Trail logs are a good, safe way for people to learn this," said Pearce.

"If crossing a log is a rider's goal, but he looks

at the log while he crosses it, his horse will most likely hit it. But if the rider looks beyond the obstacle, the horse won't hit the log.

"If you're focusing on a goal, you need to focus on it until you are close to completion, then focus on your next goal.

"In the same way, a jumper looks at the next jump, not at the one he's going over."

Pearce also teaches a philosophy called CANI, an acronym that stands for Constant And Never-ending Improvement.

"If you increase anything in your life by 1 percent each day, exponentially you'll have thousands of percent improvement by the end of the year," she said.

"That's what Joby does as a trainer. Each day, he seeks to get a little improvement."

It's a philosophy Pearce applies to herself.

Promoting Paints

Pearce got the idea to mix Paints with her therapy work several years ago as she gave motivational speeches around the country. She continues to accept speaking engagements occasionally.

"I always used slides of my horses to describe points I wanted to make in my presentations," she said. "I realized I was promoting Paints

From the horse's mouth

After spending most of her life around horses, Melisa Pearce applauds their role as teachers.

"I've learned to translate human behavior through observation and interaction with my animals," she said.

"The lessons I have learned are endless regarding patience, attachment to results, fight or flight reactions, developing humility, letting go of fear, and much more."

Here is a sample of her observations and those of her partner, trainer Joby Priest:

- Horses teach a great deal about setting boundaries.

"If you don't set boundaries, horses will run right over you," Pearce said. "Inside and out of the round pen, men make demands.

They give clear instructions to horses. Women ask, and are often too nice and even beg."

- Maintaining momentum is important whether you are learning to change gaits or reach a goal.

"After you have a horse moving from a walk to a jog, you have to maintain that momentum," Pearce explained.

"If you're a beginning rider who says, 'Oh good! I did it!' the horse will go back to the walk because the rider stops focusing.

"A key part of being successful in anything is following through."

- When correcting a horse, don't do more than is needed.

"If you are fixing a horse, you want to do only as much as is

necessary," Priest said.

"Otherwise, it shatters their confidence."

- Trying too hard can be detrimental, whether a person is selling real estate or riding.

"The more you try to make things happen, the more elusive things become," said Pearce.

"Sometimes you need to give a nudge, not a lot of pressure."

- Fine-tune your goals and be specific.

"For example, if your goal is to own a fine stallion," Pearce explained, "you have to know what breed you want and do your homework.

"Focus every day on the exact horse you want. Be inclusive of every detail and allow him to show up."

wherever I spoke. Horses are such metaphors for our life experiences, and they have so much to teach us about how to live and react.

"People were always asking to come to my ranch and see my horses. I even sold some of my horses that way."

Selling is a skill at which Pearce is keenly adept. After graduating from Arizona State University with a bachelor's degree in social work, she sold real estate and was inducted into the Real Estate Millionaires Club in Scottsdale, Arizona, when she was 21 years old.

In 1989, she returned to ASU and earned a master's degree in social work, graduating with honors. She then went into private practice.

Meanwhile, Pearce, who had been horse-crazy as a teen, made her childhood dream of having a ranch and a champion stallion come true.

In 1990, she bought a 40-acre ranch in Cave Creek, Arizona, naming it Lil Bit North (after "Lil Bit," Melisa's childhood nickname). After acquiring Go Robin Bar, she turned the ranch into a state-of-the-art breeding facility.

Meanwhile, Molly had been born with total aganglione hirschsprungs disease, a disorder in which nerve cells do not develop in the intestinal tract.

"It's the human equivalent of lethal white syndrome," Pearce explained. "I thought it was so ironic that here we were, Paint Horse breeders,

and my daughter was born with a condition that can afflict Paints."

Molly required 24-hour medical care during her first seven years, almost all of which her parents provided themselves. During that time, Pearce also counseled patients at a retreat center in Flagstaff, Arizona, where Molly could escape the searing summer heat.

In 1998, the Melisa moved her horse operation from Arizona to its present location in Colorado. Today, Molly is a pretty teenager who helps at the ranch and shows horses.

"My dream was to have a ranch where I could raise Paints, live near the Rockies, and that would allow me to help others through workshops and seminars," Pearce explained.

However, Pearce, who believes in visualizing and manifesting goals, always has her eye on the future. Now that she has realized her Rocky Mountain ranch, she would like to create an elder haven for horses, a place where older equines could live and be cared for.

She is grateful for the lessons her Paint Horses have provided her. The seminars offer Pearce an opportunity to share that knowledge with others, she said.

"I like to expose people to the beauty and wonder of horses," she noted, "because horses can help us find the magic inside ourselves." 