

Taking the reins

MEET SOME OF THE LEADING LIGHTS HONOURED
IN THE 2019 WA WOMEN'S HALL OF FAME.

*All in the family | Full bloom | Carlisle seduction |
Seasonal beauties | Wee problems*



Horses for courses
M'Liss Henry (clockwise
from above) at
Claremont Therapeutic
Riding Centre with rider
Mercedes Portaro; with a
budding rider; sharing
the joy with Princess
Anne. MAIN PICTURE
IAIN GILLESPIE

**'We've had kids who
can't speak actually
start talking.'**

Golden girls

This week another 15 pioneering West Australians were inducted into the WA Women's Hall of Fame. West Weekend meets three of them.

WHAT PEOPLE NOW KNOW AS THE CLAREMONT Therapeutic Riding Centre began 46 years ago. Back then it was part of the Riding for the Disabled group but I don't like to use the term "disabled" any more. I prefer "special needs".

I'd moved to Western Australia a few years beforehand with my then husband. Having grown up on a station in Condobolin, NSW, I'd always had an affinity with horses and ridden them competitively. I was actually a reserve for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Not long after I moved here, I bought some ponies and kept them here at the Claremont site, which was Federal land back then. One day I happened to meet two couples who had a child each with cerebral palsy and polio and I asked if the kids would like to ride. I just thought they might have some fun at the very least.

One of my heroes then and still today was Lis Hartell, a Danish woman with polio who rode in the Helsinki Olympic Games. She got out of her wheelchair and rode a dressage test against all of the women and all of the men and got a silver medal. She was such an inspiration to me — my mother had given me a book about her — so when I met this child with polio and the other with cerebral palsy, I thought let's try and do something here.

So I started off with two kids every Tuesday. And then some more families turned up and I started doing it on Thursdays too. And then the father of the boy with cerebral palsy said "Let's see if we can start a group here". So we put in an application to lease the land and that's how it all began.

We've had thousands and thousands of children through our centre. I honestly haven't kept count. But each time one of our horses gets old and dies, usually at around 35 years, I figure they've had about 20,000 people on their back.

And it's not just kids any more. We have people with Alzheimer's, heart problems, breast cancer, everything. No matter what a person's condition is or what their special needs are, you have a goal for

M'Liss Henry, 75, has joined the dots between horses and people and found a therapeutic connection that continues to change lives.

them. It doesn't matter how big or small the goal is; it's about giving people a sense of purpose and an aim.

Horses are incredible creatures and we've seen some amazing things happen here. The NDIS might not recognise horses as being therapeutic but they most certainly are.

We've taken babies as young as nine months old, profoundly handicapped children, and I just put them on a cloth in front of my saddle and let the movement of the horse move them around. You'll see all the little muscles that are tense and stiff ... all of a sudden they relax and go long, stretchy and soft. Just half an hour is enough for them.

Gradually I try to help them get stronger and sit up. When you're sitting on a horse, it's moving everything. One hour on a horse is like eight hours in a gym. Your muscles are strengthening all the time.

When a horse moves its hind legs, it's like a person walking. That's why it's really good for the quadriplegics — and I've had a lot of them through the centre. Although they can't move in their wheelchairs, once they're on a horse their whole body is moving. Horses simply let us move with them.

They are also wonderful for our mental health. You only have to look into their eyes. I have riders with Alzheimer's who, when they get on a horse, can't remember whether they're getting on or getting off. But they get so much out of the whole experience.

I had a 97-year-old lady from Geraldton who was always determined to canter. She was so small and her bones were so brittle that I insisted she only trot. But she always wanted to canter and would talk non-stop the whole time!

We've had kids who can't speak actually start

talking. It's happened within an hour of them being here. Their parents tell me their child can't speak and I'll just say "The horse's name is Apple", and we'll be gone for an hour or so and at the end of the session the child will say "Apple". The parents can't believe it. Clearly not speaking has been a conscious decision on the child's part. The horse has unlocked that.


We've come such a long way with this centre. I don't have time these days to think about what motivates me any more. I simply wake up each morning and know that I have to be at the riding school no matter what. People will come very early and they'll come very late — we don't keep set hours and we never do lunch! At the moment I have 60 horses to look after.

We have a wonderful board, a terrific CEO and lots of volunteers who ensure this centre keeps running. It's by no means a one-person operation. You could never do this by yourself. We need at least three to four volunteers each day.

All the horses here trust me and talk to me. I'm not sure what it is — maybe it's an affinity or an aura — but certainly being brought up on the land is a big part of who I am.

I remember that as kids my sister and I rode horses without saddles and bridles. And that's because we simply couldn't afford them. My father used to make me go out and pick up all the dead sheep wool. He said when I had three full wool packs we could go to Sydney and buy a saddle. That was a big day, let me tell you. My first saddle. I was eight years old.

Having only girls, Father used to call my sister and I "Jimmy" and "Scruffy". Yes, he was a little delusional (laughs). If we did something wrong he'd say "You're doing it like a girl", so we'd go and do it better. Of course now "doing it like a girl" is fantastic. Girls get things done.

I've no plans to retire. What would I do? I've no super and I love what I do. This is me. 

Interview: Carrie Cox

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