



# Famesgate Stables

## BRINGING SADDLEBREDS TO THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY

By Erica Faulkner

Tucked back in the rolling hills of the Shenandoah Valley, just east of Charlottesville, VA, lies a new American Saddlebred training facility, Famesgate Stables. It's a picture of perfection with lush green grass pastures as far as the eye can see. The 200 plus acre property leaves nothing to be desired. It was previously used as a retreat of sorts, complete with a full archery range and two lakes, to go along with the gorgeous wood lots and fields. Although all of this makes the property special, the real draw to Famesgate is the horses, and trainer Katy Sterba.

A large 24 stall barn acts as the main training barn, with an extra wide aisle way, large windows, and rubber-matted 12x12 stalls. It is obvious that this facility was built with the horse's comfort in mind. High ceilings let the warm Virginia air blow through the barn, making it the perfect atmosphere to work horses in. The arena is spacious, measuring 60'x180', and includes a round pen at one end.

Famesgate Stables may be new to Virginia, but Katy is not new to the industry. Born in Albuquerque, NM, her introduction to the saddle horses came via her parents. Janet and Jeff Sterba are long-time Saddlebred owners and exhibitors, and at one time even had their own public training operation; Seven Oaks Farm, where John Champagne handled the training. Janet herself is quite the horsewoman and has won with the champion horses: CH Take IT From The Top, Horace Taft, Undulata's Optical Illusion, CH Caraway's New York Minute, CH Callaway's Born For This, and others. Just last year Janet and CH Caraway's New York Minute were crowned the Amateur Fine Harness National Champions at the American Royal. However, it was the early years, when they did everything on their own and out of their back yard, that defined who Katy has become today.

"My parents started out doing it all on their own, building their own barn, training their own horses," Katy said. "We always had horses at home when I was growing up."

Katy was destined from the start to be a horse trainer. Janet showed her first five-gaited horse while pregnant with Katy. It's no wonder Katy loves the horses, she was practically born on one.



Katy Sterba and her husband Patrick of Famesgate Stables.



A young Katy and one of her first horses, Satan's Angel.



Katy and her brother Dane, spending time with the great CH Skywatch.



Katy and Janet Sterba, and Andrea Harry, share a moment with CH Caraway's New York Minute after Janet won the Amateur Fine Harness World's Championship in 2014.

"She has always loved the horses," Janet said. "I knew from day one, that she would end up working in the industry."

Horse shows were a social thing for the family; they had other friends who also owned and showed horses, and the horse shows were a time to gather together and enjoy one another's company. It did not take long for Katy to follow suit and begin showing herself.

Katy's first horse was a Quarter Horse Arabian cross named KK. When she was a teenager, she progressed to riding on a competitive level.

"There was a trainer just outside Albuquerque named Eloise Garcia, and she sold us my first show horse, Worth A Fame," she said. "I was 13 and he was my Christmas present after I had spent the year catch riding him for a friend of ours."

Worth A Fame and Katy made their debut the following year at the UPHA Almost Summer Horse show winning both their classes in the junior exhibitor three-gaited division. It was the start of something special, and the two developed a unique bond that lasted through the years.

"Famesgate is named after him," Katy said. "When my family moved to Virginia in the late 1990's, so did he."

They continued to show for a number of years, finding success no matter the division they chose. At ASHAV in 2003, they won the Three-Gaited Show Pleasure class for riders 14-17 years of age. After that show, Fame was retired. Although no longer a show horse, he continued to be an important part of the Sterba family.

"Once he was retired, Ceil and Kenny Wheeler were gracious enough to let him live out retirement at their East Belmont Farm where he was eventually laid to rest almost six years ago."

Fame was just one of the horses that Katy showed during her junior exhibitor career. In 2003, she teamed up with She's A Starbust, who was just a five-year-old at the time. Katy did not let the challenge of a young horse deter her, instead she rose to the occasion. Debuting at Bonnie Blue National in the junior exhibitor five-gaited division, they put on an impressive performance to take home their first win.

Katy loved showing, but eventually wanted to see what else the world had to offer her as well. After graduating high school from St. Anne's-Belfield in Charlottesville, VA, she attended the University of Virginia and pursued a college degree outside of the horse industry.

"I thought I wanted to be a doctor," she said. "But then my interest changed and I decided to pursue a career with HIV/AIDS treatment in underdeveloped countries."

It was at this time that Katy made the decision to join the Peace Corps. After graduating from college, she headed off to Senegal, West Africa.

"It was hard," Katy said, "but I am glad that I did it. I think it helped me to learn perspective."

A health volunteer in the Sub-Saharan desert, living with a local-host family, in a house with no electricity, Katy spent 18 months working on various health initiatives in a community of about 250 people. After returning home she began to explore an entirely new career path; politics. She moved to Washington, DC and started work at a lobbying firm.

Katy enjoyed her work at the firm as the job offered her the ability to develop relationships with others in the political community while coordinating fundraisers and other social activities.

While she was living in West Africa, her family moved their show horses from Kentucky to Mercer Springs Farm in Princeton, WV, to be trained by Smith Lilly. Janet wanted to have the horses closer to home and the distance to Mercer Springs allowed her to visit the horses more often.

Katy would make the long five-hour drive from DC to Princeton to ride, as often as she could. No matter the distance, Katy was not about to give up riding. And eventually, she realized just where her passion truly lied.

"Smith and my mom were going to Kentucky to look at horses and I, of course, could not turn down the opportunity to join them. And it was during that weekend that I really started to consider getting back into the horses full time."

Katy's career choice was about to change for the final time.

"I had been missing the horses while in DC; the distance made it hard to get to the barn as often as I wanted. And I liked my job in the city. I really did. But, I did not love it."

There was no denying that she was passionate about horses, but like most young people who are considering a career as a horse trainer, Katy was on the fence.

"I was nervous that if I took up a career as a horse trainer, that somewhere down the line, the enjoyment of riding would be lost. It would be just a job, and I did not want that."

Undecided on what to do, but knowing she did not want to live out the rest of her life working in an office, Katy turned to Lilly for advice.

"We were on that horse shopping trip and Smith asked if I had ever considered a career training horses," Katy said. "I told him I had and why I was hesitant."

Lilly knew Katy had talent, she had ridden under his instruction during her amateur career, and in his eyes, there was no hiding the fact that she had what was needed to succeed in the business.

"I knew Katy would achieve big success in the horse world even before she came to work for us. She had superb riding skills and incredible tenacity of character that she demonstrated as an amateur rider in our barn, and tremendous passion for horses," Lilly said.

Katy went home from the trip and was still undecided on what to do. After a discussion with her brother Dane, who encouraged Katy to follow her heart and go after her passion, she called Lilly. They talked about what the horse trainer life was like, what the demands of the job entailed, and the level of commitment it took.

And then, Lilly said something to Katy that to this day, she has not forgotten. "He told me, 'there will always be an open cubicle somewhere.'" And that was that, the decision was made. "That was what I needed to hear. I knew then, that I had to go for it and at least try."

It was the end of January, 2012, when Katy made the trip to Princeton to make Mercer Springs Farm her home. The experiences she had while working for the



Kathy aboard one of her favorite horses that she had the opportunity to work and show, Spending Money. This horse is still showing and winning today.



Katy and She's A Starburst at the Roanoke Valley Horse Show.



Katy and her first show horse, Worth AFame. Famesgate stables is named after this exceptional show star.



Katy and CH Take It From The Top make a victory pass at the Roanoke Valley Horse Show.

Lilly's were some of the best, giving Katy the foundation to become the talented trainer she is today.

"Working for the Lilly's was the best way to start my career. At Mercer Spring, you not only groom horses, you are afforded the opportunity to learn how to train them while under the watchful eye of Smith, Alexandra, and Sandy."

Katy learned the value of structure that was the daily routine at Mercer Springs. "Every detail is thought through, and everything is done with a cohesive thought process. Working like this really enabled me to learn and to figure out why things worked when they did, and why they didn't work sometimes as well. I really learned to think through the process of training a horse."

During her two-year apprentice position at Mercer Springs, Katy got to work with many world champion caliber horses. Her greatest memory was one that many would only dream of; she got to ride CH Swing And Singin' on the green shavings.

"I was her caretaker from the time I started working at Mercer Springs," Katy said. "Smith stressed that although there would be many world champions to come and go, she was one of the greatest of all time. She is an athlete of the highest caliber and it was all I could do but stare every time Smith rode her."

Lilly gives credit where credit is due, pointing out that Katy took great care of this horse. "Her attention and care for this mare played an integral part in the horse's success."

It was Louisville 2013, and Catherine Wheeler and CH Swing and Singin' had won the Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited 14-17 Div. I class. The mare was not returning to the championship, so the Wheelers, with Lilly's nod of approval, gave Katy the opportunity to throw a leg over the mare and take her for a spin in Freedom Hall.

"That was a ride I will never forget and likely never replicate."

While she was at Mercer Springs, Katy turned out a number of top horses, such as Walterway's Believe

In Me, Slate, Pineapple Delight, Hearts Super Fine, and I'm The Chosen One.

Grateful for the opportunities that Mercer Springs provided for her, Katy wanted to expand her knowledge and experience of Saddle horses in another region.

"I really learned so much during my time there, but I was young and hoping to learn all I could before going out on my own. Kentucky and it's Saddlebred history held a huge draw in the variety and wealth of knowledge it could afford me with."

Working in the political field, Katy had learned the value of making connections with others. She knew the value of networking. She also understood

that in order to succeed, she needed to continue to put herself in new and challenging positions.

"Katy was committed to learning every aspect of the horse business," Smith said. And he was right. Leaving Mercer Springs with nothing but gratitude, Katy went to work in Kentucky at Susi and Bret Day's Grey Ridge Farm.

"When our horses were in Kentucky when I was younger they were in training at Grey Ridge. So, I already knew Susi and Bret, and I was eager to learn from them this time, as an employee, not just a customer."

A smart young lady, Katy knew that she could learn something from everyone and she capitalized on the new opportunity.

"I feel that Bret is a master with a harness horse," she said. "So, I was looking forward to learning how he approached working a harness horse."

Katy had the chance work all types of horses while at Grey Ridge; and one of them was the well-known show horse, Up In Arms. Born and raised at Grey Ridge, Up In Arms was the first born of CH Open Arms, the multi-titled fine harness mare that Janet Sterba owned from 2005-2008. During those years CH Open Arms won at shows such as Asheville Lions Club Charity, Blue Ridge Classic, Midwest and more. The highlight however, was when she was crowned the Fine Harness Junior Mare World Champion in 2007. Katy commented that she felt pretty lucky to be able to show a horse with such a connection to her family's previous show horses.

"CH Open Arms was a tremendous mare," said Katy. "And Up In Arms, well, he was quirky and taught me a lot."

In 2015, Katy and Up In Arms earned a respectable fourth place in the extremely competitive ASR Sweepstakes Four-Year-Old Park Pleasure class at Louisville, quite a feat for a young aspiring trainer.



Katy works the two-year-old, Mercy Me, in the indoor arena at Famesgate Stables. This horse is showing lots of promise for owner Jennifer Joiner.



Tory Birch, Spending Money and High Proof are just a few of the other champions that Katy put into the ring while at Grey Ridge.

Continuing her quest to gain as much knowledge as she could from as many trainers as possible, her next move was to Stachowski Farm in Simpsonville, Kentucky, where she worked alongside T.J. Santaferri.

"We love Katy!" TJ said. "She is absolutely wonderful. Detail oriented and one of the hardest working people I know. I can't say enough good things about her. She is a team player and is incredibly talented."

Stackowski's offered Katy a chance to really get quality experience working young horses.

"They have a lot of young stock there. That's what they do, they bring along great young horses. And so that was a big draw for me."

In 2017, she piloted the walk-trot horse, Dream A Miracle, to the third-place honors at Louisville in the ASR Sweepstakes Four-Year-Old Three-Gaited class. Harlem's Flower Girl and Tango's Supreme Kiss, were also part of the show string that she was honored to train. However, the horse that truly has spurred Katy to the top, is the one of a kind walk-trot champion, Snowman.

Snowman, owned by Jennifer Joiner, was at Stachowski's while Katy was there. However, that was not the first time the two had crossed paths. Previously, in the years that Katy was at Mercer Spring, so was Snowman.

Joiner and Snowman experienced success in the show ring during the 2013-2015 show seasons, winning at shows such as Bonnie Blue, Roanoke, Southern Saddlebred Spring Fling, and others. However, something was missing. Snowman, not unlike many other top show horses, has his own quirks about him. His personality is unique, and at times challenging. Not everyone got along with him as famously as Katy did; there was something different about him when she was around. It was one of those connections that is unexplainable, and both Joiner and Katy knew it.

After moving from Mercer Spring, to Kismet Farm, and finally to Stachowski's, Snowman's future as a show horse, was undecided. When Katy joined the team at Stachowski's, she knew she wanted to give it a shot, and see if she could get it together with the big going gelding. With the approval from Joiner and the encouragement and support from T.J., Katy went to work.

"Katy has a way about her. She just has so much natural ability, and she is a strong rider," said Joiner. "She gives Snowman the trust and confidence he needs. She just understands him."

It was at Rock Creek last year, that Katy debuted with the newly trimmed Snowman. And what a debut it was, as they left the ring with double wins in the ladies three-gaited division. The next stop was Lexington. After coming in second in the Ladies Three-Gaited Over 15.2 qualifier, they turned it up a notch, and left last Lexington to be held at the Red Mile, as the Ladies Three-Gaited Grand Champions.

Katy's plans were to continue for a few more years as an assistant trainer. However, life doesn't always go according to plan. Janet and Jeff happened to fall in love with, and purchase, property in Troy, Virginia, and although they hoped Katy would someday return home to their farm, they didn't realize just how soon that would be. And Janet, couldn't be happier about it.

"Katy is very self-motivated," Janet said. "She is out in the barn every day working late after hours to ensure the success of this farm. It has been really impressive to me how much she does around here. And, I love that

she is always learning and uses any and all resources to learn and grown as a horse trainer."

When Katy moved home, Snowman came with her. Joiner was so impressed with what the young horse trainer had accomplished with her horse in such a short time, that she knew Katy was the trainer for her. Snowman and Katy just made their 2018 debut a couple weeks ago at the Devon Horse Show, and again, left the ring with the top honors in the Ladies Three-gaited class and the Walk-Trot Stake.

"We have three horses with her now. When the Sterbas opened Famesgate, there was no question that this was where we would keep our horses" Said Joiner. "Katy brings out the best in all of them."

The other two horses Joiner owns are prospects. A junior park mare named Coffee Lace, by Leatherwood's My Kind Of Guy and out of Gypsy's Amazing Grace, and a two-year-old mare, Walterway's Mercy Me. Mercy Me is by Roseridge More Traditional, and out of Walterway's Especially Me.

Along with these two prospects, Katy is currently working a three-year-old gaited mare that was previously at Mercer Spring Farm, named Cornerstone Moondance. "She is coming along nicely and should be ready to hit the show ring this year," said Katy.

Arrowhead's So Radiant, another three-year-old gaited mare, is making ground with her training, and

although she is not quite ready for the show ring, Katy comments that she is game and shows promise. Katy is just fine with that, as she doesn't like to rush a horse.

Along with these prospects, and a few more spectacular two-year olds, Katy has a couple lesson horses that she uses in her lesson program. Katy enjoys teaching lessons, but her main focus and passion is the young horses, and working with amateurs to get them in tip top shape for the show ring.

Behind the scenes, Katy's husband Patrick, helps to ensure that Katy has an extra hand if she needs. He is fortunate to be able to work out of the barn's office, and works along the side of Katy whenever she needs.

"He is more supportive than I could ever thank him for and helps out with whatever I need. He cleans stalls every Saturday morning and feeds with me on Sundays. If I am gone during the week, he will take care of the barn for me. He is patient, kind, and detail-oriented, everything I could want in someone to help me with the barn and horses"

Katy continues to give back to the horse industry when she can. She is an active member of the UPHA Education Committee and also the Zone 3 Director for ASHAV.

With her natural talent, patience with her horses, and exceptional work ethic, Katy is sure to take the Famesgate name into the spotlight time and time again. Virginia, just gained another great horse trainer.



The main barn aisle way at Famesgate Stables.



At the end of the large and spacious indoor arena at Famesgates is a round pen perfect for starting young prospects.