



Welcome to Willow Ridge

By Erica Faulkner

I was a cold, actually a freezing, Saturday evening in Woodstock, Illinois on February 16, 2019. Temperatures were in the low teens, and quickly dropping. The wind howled and snow was on the radar. The weather conditions provided the perfect excuse for anyone who wanted to spend a night wrapped up in their cozy home next to a fire, or enjoying a hot cooked meal with family. However, there was something exciting going on in Woodstock that evening, that even Mother Nature couldn't prevent people from attending. An event that not only the horse community enjoyed, but also the town locals, and even a few folks from out of town, me included. It was the official grand opening of Willow Ridge Farm; the new training facility owned by Meredith and Whitney Bodnar.

The evening was open to current horse owners, as well as the general public. Whitney and Meredith did an exceptional job getting the word out to the local community that there was a new stable in town, and that the barn opening was for anyone interested. Obviously, there was a lot of interest from the residents of Woodstock as the line of cars that paraded down the farm driveway throughout the evening never seemed to end.

An impressive facility, Willow Ridge sits on 33 acres of gorgeous pastures and boasts an incredible list of amenities, all designed by Whitney himself. The cold weather was a concern as the entire facility is heated. Customers and visitors enter through the front door to step into an immaculate hallway where photos of championship performances from both Whitney and Meredith's past line the walls. To the right there is a clean and efficient office space, and to the left a quaint and well-organized customer area where clients can place their belongings while they enjoy the horses. A full bath complete with a shower is also found at the end of the hallway.

The doorway at the end of the hall opens into the training barn. There are 28 stalls, each measuring 10x12 feet; 3 get ready stalls each complete with all necessary tack and grooming equipment; a large farrier space; a second bathroom; a viewing room with a picture window overlooking the indoor complete with a fridge, coffee pot, and other necessities; tack room; two bullpens and an incredible 60x200 foot indoor arena. Large garage style doors make backing in horse trailers and other large equipment easy. Currently a 100x250 foot outdoor ring provides ample space for working outside, and in the future a one-mile track will be built on the property.

Every detail of the barn's structure was carefully thought out by Whitney, right down to the grooming stalls.

"Horses are always learning from the environment you put them in. Everything at the barn was thought through with the horse's well-being in mind. The grooming



Katie Haberkorn, Meredith and Whitney Bodnar and Miss P headline the team at Willow Ridge Farm.

stalls are a nice touch as it allows us to ensure our horses are taught to stand and be patient. Better manners make for better horses," he said.

The home on the property is welcoming and tastefully decorated by Meredith. It has a real country feel with beautifully stained wood, tall ceilings, and large picture windows that give an incredible view into the back fields and woods of the property. It is a place of peace, of serenity, and of comfort.

2019 is the debut show year for Willow Ridge Farm and although the farm is new to the show circuit, Meredith and Whitney certainly are not.

Meredith (Steinhauer) Bodnar was born and raised in Wisconsin. Her father Chuck owned a Dairy Plant and her mother Denise was primarily a stay at home mom; neither one of them had any horses until Meredith was born. Meredith, like many young girls, always dreamed of having a pony. And although this dream dies out as some girls age, for Meredith, it became more than a dream, it became a lifestyle.

Meredith was nine and a half when she and her mother attended a local horse exposition where they saw the American Saddlebred for the first time. They watched in awe as riders from Knollwood Farm exhibited saddle seat riding for all of those in attendance. After the performance they headed to the barns to find out what exactly 'saddle seat' was all about. They came across Rick Wallen and found out his farm was not far from their home. It did not take long for the two of them to visit Rick Wallen Stables.

That visit led to riding lessons for Meredith. And although at the time Wallen was cutting back on the number of customers at the farm, he took a keen interest in her and often could be caught sneaking a peak while she was taking a lesson.

Meredith made the transition from lessons to show ring performances with ease when Wallen picked out CH Magic Santana for her to show. They purchased the well-known champion from Delovely Farm, and right away it was clear that they were a great match. As one would expect, Meredith's skills as a rider continued to improve and it was not long before she was ready for a new horse. As luck would have it, there was a particularly fancy walk-trot horse named In Your Dreams,

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Whitney and Montebelle Skywalk won the 1995 World Champion 13 Years and Under Pleasure Driving. Howie Schatzberg perfectly captured the very moment when Luke thought the world was ending and tried to pull a fast one, but Whitney was prepared for the unexpected and it didn't shake him at all.



Meredithe posed with Born On The Bayou after their Amateur Road Pony Championship win at Indianapolis Charity in 2017.

that belonged to the Werry Family, that had become available.

"Rick actually had a dream about us purchasing In Your Dreams," Meredith said. "The Werrys wanted CH Magic Santana and we wanted In Your Dreams."

It worked out perfectly, the swap was made and Meredith embarked on an incredible journey with her new horse. In 1999 she won her first world's champion title aboard this sporty horse, taking home the World's Champion Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited 11 and Under win. Over the years this team created quite a name for themselves.

As In Your Dreams got older and Meredith gained more show ring experience, she again found herself looking for another mount, and Denise knew exactly what she wanted for her daughter's next horse.

"Mom always had this vision of the epitome of what a three-gaited horse should be. She loved the picture of a pretty girl on a pretty horse, collected, animated, and classic." Said Meredith. One horse stood out in Denise's mind, CH To Die For.

The high-powered gelding was known for his exceptionally game attitude. CH To Die For, or "Puff," was not the first horse that most people thought of when they pictured the perfect amateur horse, let alone suitable for a junior exhibitor. That didn't matter to Meredith or Denise, nor did it bother Wallen. One thing that the horse industry was yet to learn about Meredith, was that she accepts challenges with grit and determination, as well as style and grace. She was not about to let the naysayers keep her from, at the very least, trying.

CH To Die For was already a two-time world's champion. Erin Boggs rode Puff to the Ladies Three-Gaited 15.2 and Under Stake win in both 2002 and 2003, and Gene Boggs had earned a well-respected



Whitney and Meredith Bodnar on their wedding day.

reserve world's champion honor with him in the Three-Gaited 15.2 and Under Stake in 2001.

"I will never forget when Saddle Horse Report came out with the poster of Puff and Gene," Meredith said. "I just loved him and dreamed of owning him. His poster hung on my wall for as long as I can remember."

It was at Lexington Junior League 2004 when Meredith stepped aboard the gelding. She had tried many horses prior to this point, but they all failed in comparison to Puff.

"I remember the first time I sat on him," she said. "Erin had just won with him. And I remember going up to her after the class. She had on her navy-blue tux with a pink vest and white gloves, it was what she

always wore on him. I was so nervous. She asked if I was the one who was going to be trying him out the next day. I nodded. She told me to leave my spurs at the room when I came to ride."

As is typical to Lexington Junior League, the weather the night before Meredith's trial ride, was nothing but thunderstorms. The track was pure mud, which only added to the challenge of stepping aboard a horse that had incredible athleticism and go forward mentality.

"I brought my saddle to the barn the next day and Erin was there waiting. What they had not told me at the time, and I am thankful they didn't, was that Puff really only liked one rider at a time. Meaning, no one warmed him up except for the person showing him. He didn't appreciate being interrupted when he was ready to show. He was all go forward and ready for business all the time," Meredith said.

She was thrown up on him and out to the track they went.

He hit that track and stepped right up to his bridle.

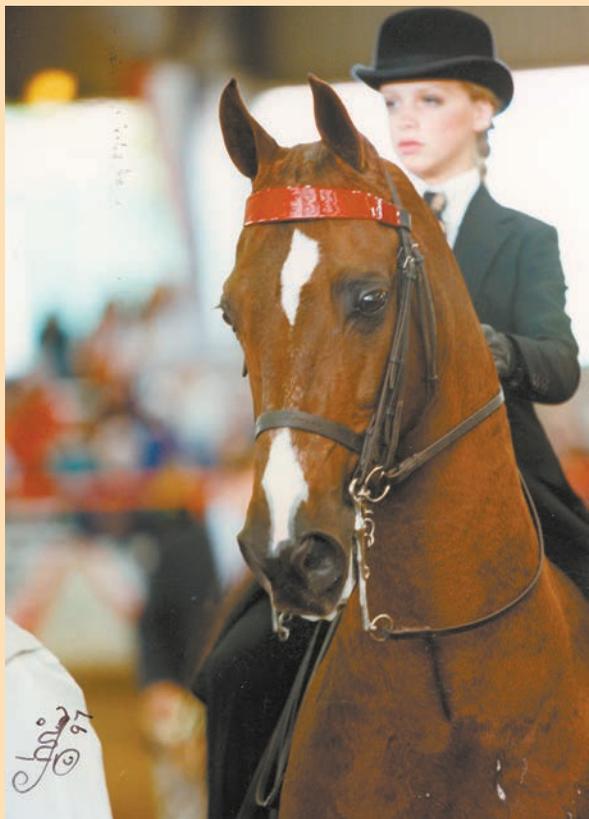
"He hit that track and stepped right up to his bridle. I used to have a bad habit of leaning forward when I rode. Not on Puff. His neck was so far in my lap that it was impossible to lean forward. I felt like I was steering him by his ears!"

Erin made sure the two were going to be ok, and then she turned them loose into the ring.

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Meredithe was met by her trainer Rick Wallen when she won her first world's championship in 1999 aboard *In Your Dreams*.



Meredithe and her first American Saddlebred show horse, *CH Magic Santana*.

"It was the coolest thing. I just remember going into the ring and worrying about the mud, hoping it didn't affect us. It didn't. We got to the end of the long straightaway, and I turned and looked back at mom. We both knew it right then, he was the one. It was a done deal."

Denise and Wallen exhibited great faith in Meredithe's ability to ride. The road was not easy, but they were prepared for that. Riding Puff was more the

just riding for a blue ribbon, although they won their fair share. It was riding for the thrill and love of what he had offer. Puff chose Meredithe just as much as she chose him. Titillating and exciting, this team defied the odds together and created lasting memories that were enjoyed by the show horse industry as a whole.

When his show days were done, CH To Die For retired to Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, at Kristin Buerger's Cedar Valley Farm, where he spent his final days enjoying green grass and lots of love from Buerger and the Steinhauers, until his passing in April of this year. He was 23 years of age.

Meredithe is a versatile exhibitor, for as good of a rider as she is, she is an equally talented driver, especially when it comes to driving Hackney Ponies. Denise and Meredithe purchased Thunder And Lightning as their first pony; he actually joined the family before any of the horses did. Denise enjoyed sitting behind



CH To Die For was one of Meredithe's most challenging horses, however he also was one of her favorites, and one that taught her a lot about patience.

this champion and earned her share of blues and tricolors. As the years progressed, so did the ponies. Dun Haven Awesome Choice, CH Thunderation, CH Dun Haven Majestic Motion, Born On The Bayou, Night Voyager, and Dun Haven Awesome Attraction, were all part of the Steinhauer Family at one time or another.

Meredithe and CH Thunderation were, and still are, a household name. In 2005 they were named the Junior Exhibitor Road Pony 14-17 Sec. A World's Champion, as well as the Junior Exhibitor Road Pony Champion and AHHS Youth Medallion Road Pony 14-17 National Champion at Kansas City under Wallen's instruction. Fast forward to 2012, under the direction of Rich and Maureen Campbell at their Majestic Oaks Farm, this team again graced the winner's circle many times. They also earned their second win on the green shavings that year when

they were named the Amateur Road Pony 50 Inches and Under World's Champion as well as the Reserve Amateur Road Pony World's Champion of Champions, with a first-place vote. At Kansas City they were victorious in both of the amateur road pony classes. Their final trip to Freedom Hall in 2014 earned them the roses one more time as this incredible team excited the crowd and earned the tricolor in the Kentucky County Fair Road Pony Championship.

Meredithe garnered many world and national titles with the aforementioned ponies, however, her partnership with CH Thunderation left her with more than just memories of blue-ribbon rides; it left her with the memory of the night she met the man she would marry, Whitney Bodnar.

Unlike Meredithe, Whitney grew up in the horse business. His mother and father, Paulette and Stan Bodnar, own the successful breeding and training facility, Merriehill Farm, where they turn out top Morgan show horses. Whitney and his brother Mark were born into the horse business, and Whitney knew from a young age that he was going to be a horse trainer. There was never a question in his mind nor a thought to be anything else.

Whitney's show career is filled with blue ribbon rides and drives, too numerous to list them all. His list of wins from the Morgan Grand National and World Championship Horse Show alone, is one to be admired and respected. In the 15 years he has been training horses, he has won over 100 World and Grand National Championship titles.

Paulette comments that there have been so many wonderful memories throughout the years while watching Whitney grow and mature into a talented horseman.

"There are many memories, but this was a good one," she said. "It was 1995 and we were warming up for Whitney's world championship with Luke (Montbelle Skywalker). Someone had shot off some baby powder and Luke saw it on the ground. To most horses it would be no big deal, but not to Luke. He thought the world had ended."

"So, when Whitney and Luke won the class (World Champion 13 Years and Under Pleasure Driving), they were on their victory pass and without thinking anything of it, I kicked up some dirt, you know, to get Luke's ears up. Luke did an about face, but it never phased Whitney. He was not giving up on his victory pass, and he just motored Luke back around and got down the rail."

And still to this day, Whitney handles adversity with the same confidence and determination. Whitney, like his wife, enjoys a good challenge. One of his proudest moments came from (Deldete) such a challenge; the challenge of taking on a horse that others didn't think would amount to anything. He saw a young mare that, despite her small stature, had something special about her. It was because of her, that he became the youngest person to win an open world champion title. That mare was Cingate Starry Night.

"When she was two, no one really thought much of her. She was small, and to look at her standing on the crossties, well, she didn't look like much," Whitney said. "But I just had a feeling about her. I had to give her a chance."

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It's hard to find a photo of Whitney where he isn't smiling. Here, his excitement is evident, as he congratulated Manhattan Sunrise and Diane Conrady when they won the World Champion Park Harness Ladies class in 2015.



VDM Intense and Whitney were reserve in the World Champion Park Harness Four-Year-Old class in 2018. Meredith relates this horse's look resembles that of CH To Die For, which is just one of the reasons she purchased him.

Whitney proved himself with this mare. He trusted his gut feeling, his uncanny ability to see what a horse can become, instead of what they are at the moment. Because of his ability to evaluate how much potential a horse has, he has had incredible success with choosing top young prospects and developing them into the show horses he knows they can be.

"Starry Night was special right from the start. She never had a bad day. You could always count on her to make you look good."

And look good they did, so good that in 2010 they won the World Champion Futurity Three-Year-Old Pleasure Driving, and then, they returned to bring home the roses from the World Champion Open Pleasure Driving. Whitney was 26 years old, and at that time was the youngest person to win an open world championship.

"I'll never forget that night," Whitney said. "When they called us out for the win, I was so excited that I jumped up off my seat and broke the tug. Everyone came rushing in to help so that we could take a victory pass." This is a prime example of the camaraderie and support that is found amongst the trainers in the industry.

Last year, Whitney watched Graycliff Tony Hawk and Peggy Alderman win the World Champion Park Harness class, and then Merriehill After Hours GCH and Eric Antman won the next class, taking home the World Champion English Pleasure win. Whitney said, "I watched those horses win back to back world champion honors, and to know that I started both of them, well that felt pretty good."

So, how does a Morgan trainer and a Saddlebred and Hackney exhibitor find their way to one another? By way of Freedom Hall of course, where dreams are realized for so many every year. Whitney happened to be at Louisville in 2013 helping his brother Mark show some colts in hand. It was after the evening session and Whitney was visiting his friends at Majestic Oaks' stalls, when Meredith showed up.



Katie took time during Willow Ridge's open house to let visitors meet the Morgan horse up close and personal. In this photo, Merriehill Moonshine made friends with a young visitor.

"I saw Whitney sitting on a tack trunk drinking Spotted Cow, which is a beer that can only be found in Wisconsin," she said. "I walked right up to him and asked him for a Spotted Cow." Meredith admits she was a little anxious that evening, as it was the night before she and CH Thunderation were going to try to defend their 2012 title.

The two sat and chatted for a while that night, hitting it off as if they had known one another their whole lives. Soon, Meredith started to take an interest in Morgan horses, thanks to Whitney.

"I fell in love with Merriehill After Hours," she said. It was not long before she owned her first Morgan, Diana Flaire. Thanks to Whitney and Diana Flaire, Meredith and Denise both became fans of the Morgan horse. As Meredith says, "Diana is the reason I fell in love with Morgans. She and I shared a very special rela-

tionship, one that I feels exemplifies the breeds ability to bond with their owners."

Meredith comments that it is because of Diana that she is the professional she is today.

"I wouldn't be here without her."

Diana left such a grand impression on both Meredith and Denise that they decided to purchase another Morgan for their show string. The exceptional VDM Intense.

"I was living in Wisconsin, and Whitney was going on one of his runs to visit the Amish. I was in graduate school and had class, but wanted so badly to go on the trip with him. I asked him if he could go another day. Can you believe he said, nope!" Meredith said with a smile.

Whitney laughed, "It wasn't that I didn't want to change the day of the trip so she could go, it's because I couldn't. There are only certain days that you can visit the Amish. They decide, not me."

Meredith boasted a perfect attendance record for her academics, and so she decided she could miss a day, rightfully so, and off she went.

"It was a unique experience," she said. "When we got to this one barn, it was already dark out. They brought out Chief (VDM Intense), and literally just trotted him on the line in the headlights of the car. All I saw was ears and knee and a red mane, and I knew he was barefoot. That was enough for me. It was a really cool sight to see."

Having seen Chief show as a weanling, a few years prior, Meredith already knew that he had the look she loved.

"I watched him at the Morgan Weaning Gala, and when he came into the ring, I immediately talked to my mom and told her he had caught my eye. Well, he had caught hers too. We both had the same exact thought, that he looked just like what Puff must have looked like when he was a baby."

Chief became part of Whitney's string of horses. And it was a match right from the start. Patience is just one of the many things that Whitney excels at when

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One of Whitney's proudest moments in the show ring was when he exhibited Cingate Starry Night to the World Champion Pleasure Driving win, and thus making Whitney the youngest person to ever win an open world champion title, at that time.



Meredithe and CH Thunderation were at the top of the road pony division for years, however their career soared to new heights from 2012 to 2014, winning nearly every class they entered.

it comes to training horses. And that was just what Chief needed, someone to be patient with him.

"We didn't show him as a two-year-old," Whitney said. "He still had a lot of maturing to do. We nicknamed him 'noodle' because he was all over the place that year."

Yet another good decision made by Whitney and Meredith, that paid off big when VDM Intense hit the ring in 2017, he showed five times, winning four times, and then was reserve in the other. One of the wins was the World Champion Futurity Park Harness Three-Year-Old class. In 2018 he won every time he hit the ring, except once. One of his wins that year was the Grand National Park Harness Four-Year-Old Stallion class. His one defeat was not a shameful one either, as he was named the Reserve World Champion Park Harness Four-Year-Old.

Meredithe and Whitney's relationship continued to grow over the next couple years, as they supported one another during the good times and the tough times. It was obvious they had something real, something that both of them knew, was a once in a lifetime thing.

Meredithe was still living in Madison while Whitney resided in Woodstock just far enough away from one another that they started to ponder the idea of someday buying property of their own. Meredith fell in love with Woodstock during her visits to see Whitney at Merriehill, and so she was open to moving to Illinois. Fate took over and gave the two of them a glaring sign of what their next step should be.

"We were both looking at property, and oddly enough, we e-mailed each other the listing for the current location of our farm at exactly the same time. It was one of those

moments when you just know what the next right move is. I mean, what are the odds of us not only eyeing the same property, but sending it to one another at exactly the same time," Meredith said.

Once they owned the lot, Whitney planned the perfect proposal, and asked Meredith to marry him while they stood on what was to be the site of their home and farm, envisioning what the future had in store for them.

Willow Ridge Farm officially opened to the public on November 1, 2018, and already they are going the extra mile to ensure that everyone feels welcome at their facility. Meredith handles the office work, and the day to day upkeep and planning that goes into running a show horse facility. Meredith earned her Master's in Library Science, which helped teach her how to run a business, how to plan and set up programs and events that are engaging and educational at the same time, among other tools that she uses every day, always trying to make the next day, better than the last.

When she's not managing the paperwork, orchestrating activities, or hopping on a horse to give Whitney a hand, she is busy giving riding and driving lessons. Meredith is the first to admit that she learned how to ride in her teenage years, but that it really has been Whitney who has taught her horsemanship and the ins and outs of the behind the scenes care of the show horses. Because of this, she works hard to ensure that every rider that walks through the door, gets the best hands-on experience possible. She takes the time to teach them proper care for the horses, how to tack a horse up, etc. As with everything she does, she does it well and with attention to detail, because she knows just how much the details matter. Having been a customer before



Meredithe and the Morgan that sparked her love for the breed, Diana Flaire.

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she became a trainer, she understands what customers really want, so she brings that knowledge to the barn with her every day.

Katie Haberkorn is another valued member of the Willow Ridge Farm team. Her focus is assisting Whitney in the daily training of the horses, and also teaching lessons. Haberkorn got her start as a barrel racer, and thus has a real appreciation for the importance of a rider having good balance, and instilling in them the need for a good seat so that they really learn to feel what their horse is doing underneath them. She excels at working with children, thus making her the perfect person to handle the beginner riders, as well as the more experienced riders.

"Katie is a great addition to our team. She is patient with the horses and her students, she has a great seat and kind hands when she rides. Her natural ability enables her to handle a game young horse; she is not easily frazzled and this is so important when teaching the young ones their first lessons," Whitney said.

Whitney has successfully trained champions in nearly every division. He can team an amateur with their horse just as well as he can train and show an open horse. However, what really sets him apart, is his ability to bring along a young horse. His mannerism that he treats every horse as an individual, has produced many champions throughout the years and there is no doubt this success will continue with Willow Ridge as well. Watching Whitney work a horse, truly is something. Quiet, patient, yet firm and encouraging, he brings out the best in each of his horses. From the spotless facility, to the individualized attention, it is clear that Whitney has his customers' best interest in mind.

Rounding out the talent at the farm, is Andres Garcia. A real gentleman, polite and professional, this

hard worker grew up around horses, and if you ask anyone at the farm, they will tell you quite frankly he is one of the best caretakers in the country. A great ground-man, he has helped Whitney start many young horses. His friendly and cheerful personality is an added bonus.

Willow Ridge Farm offers something for everyone. If you want to enjoy the local shows, then you're welcome at Willow Ridge. If you want to go for the roses at world championship level competition, then you too are welcome at Willow Ridge. Meredith and Whitey both agree that promoting the sport and the Morgan horse (as well as other show horse breeds), is hugely important to the success of not only their farm, but the industry as a whole. It was

Their hopes for the future are simple, provide a custom tailored exceptional experience for each and every person that comes through their door.

evident at the barn opening that they mean what they say; a huge sign was out at the front of the property on the main road, clearly stating that the public was welcome to attend the event. And the word got out, as more than half of the attendees were people who had little to no experience with horses. A nice touch during the party were the riding demonstrations put on by the whole Willow Ridge team. Truly a job well done by the whole Willow Ridge team.

Their hopes for the future are simple, provide a custom tailored exceptional experience for each and every person that comes through their door. They purposefully limited the number of stalls they built when they designed the barn, as to ensure that they kept their numbers manageable so that they can deliver on their promises. No horse is rushed when it comes to Willow Ridge, no corners are cut in the training process. Everything is done with great care and intent. With this approach, not only are the cus-



The spacious and immaculate aisleway of Willow Ridge Farm.

tomers happy, but the horses are as well. And since Willow Ridge always has quality show horses and young prospects for sale, happy well-behaved horses are always a plus.



The large indoor arena is heated, allowing Whitney and Meredith to work their horses even when the weather outside is less than ideal.