

# CENTRE POINTE STABLES

## A Haven for Horse Lovers



Centre Pointe Stable, situated on 50 beautiful acres in Delano, Minnesota, was purchased by Judy Jensen and Todd Perkins in 1990.

BY JENNY GREY

Imagine an environment where you walk through the door and immediately make friends for life; a safe haven where you can relax from the pressures of everyday life in a beautiful facility run by owner/trainers, Judy Jensen and Todd Perkins, who quickly become an extended part of your family. It is a place where you join with others to celebrate life's small triumphs like a child's first canter or a perfect ride and support each other through some of life's challenges, be it the loss of a loved one or a hospital stay. Does it sound too good to be true? Read on to discover what the clients say about the unique benefits of life, fun and learning at Centre Pointe Stable in Delano, Minnesota.

A life-long Minnesota resident, Judy Jensen has always loved horses. Her parents, Lil and Verlin Balfanz, gave Judy her first exposure to the equine world, bringing home two ponies named Star and Larry in the back seat of their car for

three-year old Judy and her brother. Lil and Verlin leased their first large stable/barn to a well-respected saddle horse trainer, Chat Nichols. It was not until Chat relocated to Cape Girardeau that they established Kantell Stables. Through the early years, Verlin owned and operated a taxi cab company, a dirt moving service and a furniture store while Lil took care of the operations end of the various businesses. "In later years, way past the time they should have been happily retired, they bred and raised many foals and supported their kids in the horse world," Judy reported. While she campaigned show horses, her brother Dick trained race horses and ran an interstate hauling business. Lil cleaned stalls and did chores for up to 25 horses until she was well into her 70s.

Riding whatever was available at the farm, Judy learned the basics of horsemanship from her supremely supportive parents. Receiving her first Saddlebred at age nine,

Judy went into training with Chat Nichols, a gifted trainer who was recognized as the 1984 UPHA Horseman of the Year. "He was a master horseman – all instinctive. He just knew what to do," Judy remembered. "He couldn't understand why the rest of us didn't think like a horse. He scared the '!!!!' out of me!" While Chat could strike fear into the hearts of his students, Judy, who had the greatest admiration for him, modeled herself on his teaching. "Some of us had t-shirts made that said, 'I survived Chat Nichols,'" she laughed.

Judy described winning a medal class when she was 12 or 13. Not well-known or an owner of expensive horses, this was a hallmark event in her life. "I was so excited when I came out of the class," she reported, "but none of the other girls would talk to me." Feeling crushed, she went to the truck and cried her eyes out. When Chat found out what was



Judy Jensen took Todd Perkins under her wing, teaching him to ride and train horses after he came to the barn as a teenager looking for an after school job. Now partners, they have worked together for over 30 years. (Photo circa 1994.)



Judy gives selflessly of her time to many different organizations including FASH, for which she is a committee member. She is pictured at the show with her good friend, Marlys Bell.



Head Trainer, Todd Perkins, takes pleasure in creating great horse and rider/driver teams. He was on hand to congratulate Bump in the Night and Dede Disbrow for a well-earned blue ribbon in the fine harness division.

wrong, he told her sternly, "Why are you crying about that? You had better start worrying when they STOP talking about you!" Such unsportsmanlike behavior from the girls Judy defeated would never be allowed at Centre Point Stables today where there is a published code of conduct. The ten basic rules include good sportsmanship, understanding that riding is a privilege and that one's best effort is required. With zero tolerance for bad behavior, junior exhibitors at Centre Pointe have a clear understanding that if they are ever disrespectful of a parent or another adult, they will be cast out of the program.

Continuing riding with Chat until he moved to Missouri when she was 20 years old, Judy and her friend, Bob Jensen, began operating their own boarding, training and lesson business at the farm while still in their teens. Marrying at a young age then splitting up 12 years later, Bob and Judy have remained the very best of friends. Bob and Linda Jensen also operate a large stable in nearby Prior Lake. Never considering another profession, Judy knew at 10 years old she wanted to be a horse trainer. She loved everything about the horse business with some of the happiest times spent traveling to shows with her parents. "There was no generation gap," said Judy, regarding the mutual respect she and her parents had for each other, bound together by their passion for horses. "I was proud to be with them." Instilling the same set of values in the young people lucky enough to train at Centre Pointe, there is a similar attitude generated among the adult riders and junior exhibitors who unreservedly support each other.

Mostly self-employed through her 50 plus year career with horses, Judy has done just about everything equine, including showing Paint horses successfully on a national level, training and showing Morgans, Arabs and Quarter Horses and even competing for some time in barrel racing at rodeos. Although showing in almost every breed and discipline over the years, Centre Pointe Stable is now focused almost exclusively on the American Saddlebred.

Todd Perkins, now a co-owner and head trainer at Centre Pointe, arrived at the barn in a most unusual way. Unlike Judy, he did not grow up with horses. Judy, who was looking for barn help, remembers the day fourteen-year old Todd and two young girls got off the school bus, ready to interview for an after school job. The girls were enthusiastic, saying that they loved horses and wanted to work. Todd, who looked very 'goth,' dressed in black clothing with long blue hair (hard to imagine now), black fingernail polish and black eye



**Dede Disbrow and Todd Perkins gave CH Ghost of Gypsy a well-earned retirement celebration at the 2015 FASH show.**

make-up and lipstick, initially turned the job down, saying he was just 'hanging with his friends.' His dad and mom said he didn't have to work while he was in high school and he told Judy he had never even petted a horse. The next day he came back, reporting that his dad believed that maybe he should try some part-time work too. Two weeks later, the girls quit because they loved horses but did not love working. Todd, who possessed a strong work ethic, stayed on and has worked with Judy for over 30 years.

Taking Todd under her wing, Judy taught him how to ride and train horses. With a natural ability and love of the job, he flourished in this environment, taking his first lessons from Lyn Liljeblad, moving on to Academy and then to open classes at the local Tri-State circuit. Following his parents' wishes, Todd attended college where he studied psychology and biology but continued to work at the farm except for a brief hiatus when the 45 minute commute was becoming hard to manage. He found a job as a packer in a manufacturing plant to help with his expenses but admitted that it only lasted one day before he called, asking if his job was still available. He hasn't looked back since.

Earning two degrees, Todd enjoyed the sciences but his love of horses pulled him back to the farm. Gradually assuming more responsibility, he not only became head trainer, he also became co-owner and Judy's business partner. With a shared vision for the farm, this collabora-

tion has served them well. "He's a wonderful people person," observed Judy. "He has the best attitude and wants to please everybody." When she spoke with Todd, his love of the farm was evident in his voice. His articulate and thoughtful responses to our questions underlined the kind of person he is and made it clear why Judy became his mentor so many years ago.

Training at different farms over the years, Judy and Todd finally found the perfect location in Delano, Minnesota in 1990. "It is named Centre Pointe because it is the 'center point' of our lives," Judy told us. "We are thrilled when it becomes an important part of our clients' and friends' lives too." Situated on 50 acres in a valley, the farm is now home to 52 horses. Though a beautiful piece of property, the farm and buildings needed upgrading, some of it expensive. They planted trees, made major repairs on the house, added windows to the barn

while at the same time training and taking care of horses. In an earlier article in the Delano Herald Journal Judy said, "It wasn't easy. We ate generic macaroni and cheese for two years." Fortunately, they had an existing business when they bought the farm that allowed them to survive during the leaner years.

Dr. Sarah Carlson, both the farm's veterinarian and a client with three horses at Centre Pointe, remembers when Judy was training Paint horses and working at Cottonwood Farm, her former barn, with her then partner, Vic LeCorno, a second generation rodeo cowboy. Sarah originally looked at a National Show Horse Judy had for sale. Todd, still at the age when he probably thought he was immortal, hopped onto the horse bareback to try him out, causing Judy more than a little angst. Sarah, who has watched Todd mature from an athletic teenager into the respected trainer he is today, told us, "He is wonderful at finding and training horses, and always pleasant. They are so close to being family for me. Judy is my 'other mother' and Todd is like a brother." One of Sarah's happiest memories over the years is of showing American Jazz, a gaited horse trained by Todd. Describing Jazz as a bit of a rogue she remembers, "I showed him and had so much fun. He had a really big motor!" Now a client for over 25 years, Dr. Sarah is delighted with the care her horses receive.

"I have met so many different people, both kids and adults. It's so rewarding watching the kids grow as people," Todd stated. He also derives great pleasure in working with amateurs, many of whom learned to ride as adults, experiencing that first, big 'aha' moment when everything comes together. "I'm proud to be doing just what I'm doing," he said. "Not that I wouldn't mind winning a five-gaited class at Louisville but I enjoy matching people with their horses and making a great team."

Todd and Judy have trained many great teams over the years but also believe in having fun. Well-known for being a social barn with a kind and friendly word for everyone, they host pot-lucks and other social events as well as encouraging their clients to observe each other's lessons while learning from the ground. The annual clinic with a well-known trainer/instructor is a favorite activity before show season. Each year somebody famous in the horse world is invited to teach the clinic. In 2015, Centre Pointe was fortunate to have the benefit of Neilia McCracken's wisdom. They are delighted to have Smith Lilly already booked for 2016. Todd, who knows there is always something to learn, enjoys these opportunities not only to educate his clients but also to learn from these great teachers.

Attracting and retaining new clients is of continued importance. "Word of mouth is by far the best," reported Judy, although they find many different ways to drive



**The Centre Pointe trainers and clients are a close-knit, supportive group who have become each other's extended family. L-R Michele Osthoff, Lowell Holden, Amy Hutchison, Lyndsey Balfanz, Brittany Balagna, Todd Perkins, Diane Balagna and Katy Holden.**

their lesson business which fuels Centre Pointe's growth. Liz Halloran, owner of RO & MES Malizioso, an English pleasure horse, bid on a silent auction donation for a charity fundraiser at work, intending to indulge her childhood horse craziness and learn to ride safely. "The barn quickly became a haven and refuge from an increasingly stressful work environment," she emphasized. "The unique thing about Centre Pointe is that it has created and fostered a community of people sharing a passion for horses and learning to ride and show together. Nobody rides alone. We become invested in each other – celebrating milestones like a kid's first canter or a championship ribbon at a big show. We are there to console each other and offer encouragement for 'goof ups'. Judy, Todd and Amy foster an environment of respect and kindness for the horses they train and the customers they teach."

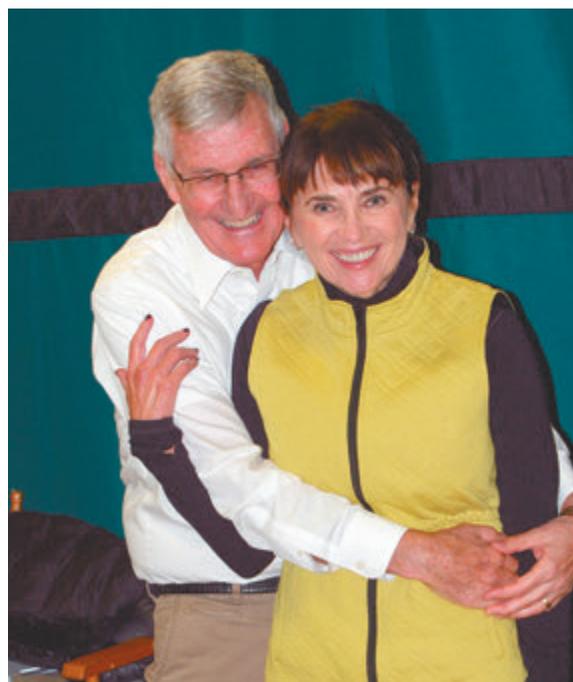
Another new lesson client arrived via an unexpected source. Seeing the Centre Pointe horses in the Delano July 4th parade, a young boy, Tucker Richard, knew he wanted to learn how to ride. Taking down the farm's number, he begged his parents for lessons. Even though they knew nothing about horses, they agreed. Buying a show horse a year later, the Richard family has now been part of the Centre Pointe program for seven years.

"It's a very supportive and encouraging environment," said Tucker's mom, Karen Richard. "They expect a lot from the kids. Tucker has learned a lot more than just riding. Judy allows no moping if somebody is upset about a ribbon and there is no tolerance for being rude to a parent or another competitor, and Todd is an exceptional trainer. He just senses things." At the recent Des Moines show, Tucker did not place in one of his qualifying classes. Talking quietly with him after the class, Todd helped him to figure out what went wrong, giving him the confidence to show back and do very well in the championship. When the Richard family recently moved an hour further away from Centre Pointe, 16 year-old Tucker had to make a big adjustment with a move to a different school. Centre Pointe provided him with a haven that helped him through this difficult transition. "It brought his spirit back," Karen affirmed.

The Richard family has wonderful memories of going to their first American Royal, enjoying top competition and camaraderie with the Centre Pointe clients as well as Louisville which Karen describes as a once in a lifetime experience. Never forgetting his first glimpse of the Centre Pointe horses at the Delano July 4th parade, Tucker has talked Judy into participating with him this year. In his words, "There may be another Tucker out there!"

In the same way Tucker was welcomed into the barn, he has taken on something of a big brother role to 12 year-old Mariah Hess who is half leasing the Richard family's Santa Fe Son (Blaise). She had a great time at Todd's recent clinic, followed by a pot luck and a Kentucky Derby viewing but Tucker really made her day when they put Blaise on a lunge line and let him roll in the dirt. "That is one of the favorite things clients do with their horses after a workout," said Judy. "Roll them' in the arena! It's good for the horses and a fun experience for the riders!" Mariah's mom, Carri, added, "Judy is strict but Mariah likes that. As a parent I appreciate being able to watch lessons and ask questions. I didn't know anything but I have learned a lot. They make me feel included and involved." Mariah, who made instant friends when she came to Centre Pointe explained, "They all teach differently. Judy is strict because she cares and wants you to be the best you can be. Todd and Amy help you get to that point." With a few years left in the junior exhibitor ranks, Mariah's goal is to win a world championship. She will certainly have the whole barn there to cheer her on.

Sandy Helgeson, owner of Boxers N Chaps, a five-gaited country pleasure horse, also provided a great example of Judy being tough for the right reasons. After a knee replacement, Sandy gave up riding saddle seat, afraid she would fall off, preferring to ride reining horses while feeling safe in her stock saddle. At a Centre Pointe open house one year Judy, who had known Sandy for many years and remembered how much she loved the saddle seat discipline, asked her why she had given it up. When she heard the reason she told Sandy,



*Long-time clients Katy and Lowell Holden had a great time at Oktoberfest in 2014.*

"Get out here and ride!" "We had a couple of tough lessons where I really had to work through it", Sandy recalled. "She put me on 'Caddy' and we worked through my fears. One day I was on 'Zoom' and could not get myself to canter. Judy said, 'You are not getting off that horse until you canter and I don't care if I have to stay out here all night with you.' You see, she knew how badly I wanted it – I just could not make myself do it. And we did it, not just once but several times in both directions. He was a lovely horse to canter. God bless lesson horses and smart, patient trainers!"

Liz Halloran added, "Judy is the consummate lifelong student of horsemanship and it shows anytime she gets on a horse; they instantly collect and 'tune in' for her. When I started showing my first horse and I had a hard time controlling his canter, Judy actually stepped into the ring, faced him, said 'whoa' and he stopped in his tracks."

Admiring Judy's toughness and total dedication to the business, Todd tells of when she recently returned from the hospital after a serious surgery. Going to Red Lobster for a meal immediately afterwards, she then hauled horses to a county fair. On a less serious note, Todd joked about her monkeys. An exotic animal enthusiast, Judy's collection has included 15 monkeys and Arnold the aardvark. One day when everybody else was at a show, Amy called to say she was trapped in the office because the monkeys were loose and trying to get through the door. She finally climbed out of the window but when the crew from the show returned to help her out, they found the monkeys had emptied everything out of the refrigerator and cupboards.

In 2013 and 2014, Judy had five major surgeries and innumerable medical appointments. "I am so terribly grateful for defeating cancer TWICE, with the prayers and help from these folks. Not only did Dr. Sarah drive me to every single appointment, she took copious notes on what was happening and kept track of where I was supposed to be and when;

because I had no idea whether I was on foot or on horseback. My humble thanks also to the clients and friends (the lines blur) who hauled me to my radiation treatments and to Todd, who fixed so many nutritious meals and to Amy for covering all of my lessons."

Michelle Winer emphasized the supportive atmosphere at the barn. When Michelle had to step back from showing for a while, Todd and Judy worked to find the right client (Lowell Holden) who would lease one of her horses. She describes Centre Pointe as being a 'real' place where you can go into your horse's stall and brush it down, getting to know the animal as more than just a show horse.

Sandy Helgeson has benefitted from Todd's ability to build teamwork between horse and rider. "Todd is excellent at finding just the right horse for his riders and bringing them together as a team. He has done an outstanding job with my current horse, Boxer. He found Boxer for me and has worked with me to accommodate my weaknesses. His canter departures are soft and fairly level – which is something I really need. He has spent long hours working with us on the slow gait and rack and the dreaded canter (which I no longer dread but have a tendency to screw up anyway). Where others would have given up, he just puts a smile on his face and says 'You're getting it or you will get it.' And so, of late, we mostly have; and I am having the time of my life!"

Liz Halloran described Todd's intuitive gifts as a trainer and teacher. "After too many shows when I choked and blew up on a canter, we re-focused on riding moment by moment, point to point, every single step tuned into what my horse needed rather than what was going on in the ring." Using this technique at a recent show, she nailed her canters two out of three times, coming out of the ring feeling ecstatic. "By the way," she added, "Todd broke gait in the second half of the Pro-Am which earned him a great deal of ribbing for the rest of the show but he took it in good form." Dede Disbrow, who rode as a child, considered several barns before deciding on Centre Pointe. Once a figure-skating coach, she enjoys competition but also appreciates the warm and friendly environment at the farm. Now a client for 12 years, she has three show horses. "Judy empowers me on the rail," she declared. "And Todd's glass is always half-full. He is the best cheerleader; always with a positive spin on a situation."

Amy Hutchison, Centre Pointe's Assistant Trainer/Instructor has been on board since 1997 after working in corporate business for 14 years. Amy describes Centre Pointe as a great facility where everyone has a philosophy of kindness in their training methods. Responsible for training and instructing many successful show ring teams, Amy is especially proud of what Katy Holden and Rare One have accomplished. A senior adult with multiple sclerosis, Katy



*There is no generation gap at Centre Pointe where junior exhibitors and adults support each other unreservedly in an atmosphere of mutual respect. L-R Julie Gamber, Tucker Richard and Geena Stepp.*

has to work very hard to keep her hands and legs steady. Thanks to the trusting partnership she has built with her sweet mare, Katy is doing very well, winning at many of the bigger shows. Katy and her husband, Lowell, now have the pleasure of watching their granddaughter, Ava Girton, show in the walk-trot division. Lowell, tired of being just the camera carrier, is looking forward to returning to the show ring himself with the lease of Without You.

Judy describes Amy as 'Miss Organization,' perfectly prepared for shows with every horse prepped and ready to go at the right time without a hair out of place. Knowing Centre Pointe will always have the right equipment on hand, other competitors often seek Amy out when they need to borrow something they forgot. There was one classic occasion, however, when Amy was not so organized. Many years ago when Todd, Amy and a client went off to a show by themselves, the trio was so excited about going out of town to a 'big show' that they forgot to load the horses into the trailer! Judy watched them pull away, wondering how long it would be before they noticed. Fortunately they had not gone too far before they realized their mistake and after a bout of hysterical laughter, loaded up and left for the show.

"Amy is a tornado," declared Liz Halloran. "She powers through the day at the barn or at a show with relentless attention to detail and determination. Amy can work her horses, give lessons and still have the energy to clean tack, pack a trailer for a show, complete entries and yet still make time for playing with the cats, giving a horse a treat or having a beer with a client. She's also tougher than nails – who else is willing to get back to training horses after recovering from a facial injury to fix the damage caused by having a horse fall on her and then step on her face?"

After a long career, Judy is no longer spending much time training horses. That responsibility rests primarily with Todd and Amy. She also relies on her great niece, Lyndsey Balfanz, the riding school director and Gonzalo Martinez, Centre Pointe's barn manager, observing that you are only as successful as the quality of your workers and customers. Julie Gamber, a client as well as a caretaker, is appreciated by the clients for her dedication and love of the horses entrusted to her care. She successfully shows her much-loved western horse, Royal Crest's Rocks a Lot, in pleasure classes and is looking forward to riding 'Eden' in the Shatner class as well.

Michele Osthoff, who commutes from her home in Ely, Minnesota to work at shows as far as five hours away, is both a client and a valued helper. She met Judy while at the Minnesota Horse Expo 28 years ago. Looking for a trail horse, she bought an Arabian from Judy. "She's a great judge of character," observed Michele. Without knowing her, Judy made an offer to Michele to work at the next show and to stay with her at the fairgrounds. That was just the beginning of a long and satisfying relationship as both a client and a friend. Michele's three children all had their show horses in training at Centre Pointe, the most recent being 16 year-old Taryn.

"Centre Pointe is the best place ever", Michele stated. "Everyone who walks through the door is immediately a friend. It's unique. People who come to take lessons will probably be there all day. In fact, if someone just takes a lesson and leaves, they will think something is wrong." (Judy mentioned as an aside that Centre Pointe is often described as an adult day care center where people are encouraged to 'hang about' and learn from other people's lessons.) Michele describes Judy as everyone's 'mother' who takes care of everything and everybody. "Todd is the nicest guy you will ever meet," she added, telling us about the time he trained an opinionated miniature horse for Taryn, all the time being in danger of being run into the wall with the cart. "He is the guardian of our children and the fairest person I know. When you add Amy's abilities and organizational skills, the three of them together are a force." Liz Halloran agreed saying, "These three along with the vets and farriers are what make Centre Pointe such a strong community. When I had to euthanize my first horse, Todd put a show braid in his mane and they stood by my side in quiet respect and support when Dr. Sarah put him down...good times and bad times are faced together at Centre Pointe."

When asked about her proudest moments, Judy was unequivocal. "It was being named the Minnesota Horse Council Horse Person of the Year for 1985 after my father won the same award in 1977." She was also the UPHA Chapter 3-4 Horseman of the Year, the MSHA Horseman of the Year and earned the Tri-State Lifetime Achievement Award. A tireless worker and board member for several different organizations, she gives unselfishly of her time to the Minnesota Horse Expo, serves as the Tri-State Horsemen's Association Vice President and jointly manages the Spring Tune Up show with Todd. In addition, she is a committee member for the FASH show. Stephanie Peterson, manager of FASH show told us, "She's a great resource with really creative ideas. This year we are implementing the 'Trainers Mingle' at her suggestion for the first time. She has also been very helpful in developing marketing and promotional materials. We're an all-volunteer committee so having trainers help out is key."



*In a long and distinguished career, Judy (with Ava Girton) is now teaching the grandchildren of people she originally taught. Ava is the granddaughter of Katy and Lowell Holden.*

Judy, who now owns just one monkey, enjoys writing in her rare time off. A published author in horse magazines and other publications, and a sometime writer of eulogies, she is thinking about writing a book entitled 'If I had known then what I know now, I would have kept the aardvark.' Giving Dede Disbrow one of her favorite early memories, Judy sat under a shade tree a few years ago at the Des Moines show with people sitting around her sitting Indian-style while she kept them entertained with tales of her life in the horse business. Everyone was laughing and begging for more from this incredible storyteller.

Reflecting on the life she has chosen Judy mused, "Sometimes I go up to the hill behind the farm and it's hard to believe that we own something so beautiful. I'm so blessed to live here. I just sit there overwhelmed with gratitude...It's a great life. I have trained many national winners and instructed at least a thousand kids. Now I'm teaching grandchildren of the kids I taught years ago." Professionally, she has just one regret – that of not accepting an internship to work for Jimmy Williams, 'the greatest horseman ever'. However, one small regret weighed against a lifetime of bringing joy to generations of horse lovers is a phenomenal track record.

Todd, loved by everyone who meets him, is happy and proud to do what he does best – building great teams of horses and riders in this wonderfully nurturing environment. A well-rounded individual, he earned his advanced open water certification for scuba, taking a dive trip to Honduras this year to escape the cold Minnesota weather. Also an enthusiastic gardener, he maintains a huge vegetable plot at the farm. "He is in incredible shape," Judy emphasized, "working with a trainer in addition to regular workouts on his own. It's no wonder that he can go a million rounds long lining around the arena!"

In a touching tribute to owners/trainers, Judy Jensen and Todd Perkins, and everyone working so hard to make Centre Pointe a home away from home, the clients have described in great detail what makes this environment unique, special and exciting. Judy, Todd and Amy are undeniably first class trainers and instructors but they have also created an environment like a warm blanket that envelops a person the first time they walk through the door. Junior exhibitors and adults alike find an atmosphere of mutual respect where they become not only good horsemen and horsewomen but also work hard to support each other to be the best people they can be. If you are looking for a barn home where everybody knows your name, look no further. Centre Pointe is the place to be.



*The Centre Pointe team was out in full force to support the Spring Tune Up show, managed by Todd and Judy.*