

# THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

## Alicia Owens

### The People's Choice Instructor of the Year

By Sara Pizzuto

First grade students are always taught to listen to their teachers. However to achieve her dream of being a horse trainer, Alicia Owens did just the opposite. As a child, Alicia professed her love of horses to her teacher, who dissuaded her and suggested that she pursue painting instead. Alicia rebutted this suggestion, and because of this obtained her one and only recess detention. Alicia may not have earned the approval of her teacher that year, but she has now earned your approval, being voted the People's Choice Instructor of the Year.

Alicia's passion for saddle seat horses led to the birth of Scottfield Stables in Montrose, Pa. It was here where she was first introduced to the Morgan Horse breed, as a few Morgans were at the farm she was renting. Alicia had always loved working with Saddlebreds, but the Morgans quickly grew on her.

"I realized what I really loved was riding and training saddle seat and that the breed was less important to me than the discipline," she said.

Alicia began incorporating Morgans into her program. Kate Kielceski was responsible for many "firsts" for Alicia. Kate was Alicia's first student to walk through the door and sign up for lessons. Her horse Hermitage Avatar GCH, was the first Morgan Alicia ever sold to a client. He was also the first horse that she ever equitated. The team of Kate and "Ronni" went on to have immense success in the equitation division, culminating in Kate's 2011 AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal victory in Oklahoma. This win is one of Alicia's most memorable memories to date, and demonstrated her knack for instructing equitation riders from early on.

"Her family gave me every opportunity to be successful," she said. "It was incredibly rewarding to have that journey come full circle for a family who means so much to me. No horse and rider combination will ever be more perfect to me than that one, and Kate really earned that win."

Kate said that winning the saddle seat medal was a goal that she and Alicia set from early on. To accomplish that goal on the same horse that Kate had shown in walk and trot was especially meaningful. It was something that Kate wouldn't have been able to accomplish without Alicia's guidance.

"Alicia is remarkable because she leads



*People's Choice Instructor Of The Year Alicia Owens celebrated with Audra Lee following her historic victory as the first rider to ever be crowned three-time Junior Saddle Seat Equitation World Champion.*

by example," Kate said. "She teaches her students to work hard, win and lose graciously, and love the sport, all while epitomizing these principles herself. Her enthusiasm, passion, and dedication rival none other. Her belief in her students inspires us to be the best version of ourselves. She is inspirational, and admirable, honest, and compassionate. Her people are lucky to call her our trainer."

It had been these successful achievements that had carried Alicia through the last few show seasons. However, 2016 marked a huge year for the Scottfield Stables team. Alicia and husband Tuffy purchased their dream facility in the Lehigh Valley of Lenhartsville, Pa in early summer. Alicia described the location change as both scary and wonderful, as they moved 36 Morgans and Saddlebreds in the middle of show season. Surprisingly for Alicia, every single customer of hers made the transition with her with just 30 days notice.

New business began rolling in immediately, and Alicia and assistant Cat Hester were in need of additional help. Longtime Morgan trainer Dan Pavan was brought on board in August of 2016 to be Alicia's assistant trainer.

Dan had been interested in Alicia's program because of his desire to work for an up and coming trainer. He said that his new job has been wonderful thus far.

"Alicia has a very positive, overly positive attitude," he said. "She is very easy to like."

Alicia's attitude was part of the reason that made the 2016 show season so successful for Scottfield Stables. With Dan's move came some of his clients and horses from his previous training barn. One of those horses, MEM I'm Back, went on to be named the 2016 Hunter Pleasure Junior Exhibitor 14-15 Reserve World Champion with Maddie Sappenfield. He was also named the People's Choice Reserve Overall Junior Exhibitor Hunter - a true testament to the teamwork of both Alicia and Dan.

"Dan simply has no ego or desire for the spotlight, but he has lots of talent," Alicia said. "The same can be said of Cat, and I truly believe I have one of the best teams of trainers in the industry. I am grateful every day that I get to work with these two professionals."

This team of trainers was also responsible for Sarah Hecht's Morgan Grand National success with Dragonsmeade Varvatos. They rounded out their incredible year by being crowned the Park Saddle Junior Exhibitor Reserve World Champions after winning 12 out of their 14 classes together. Alicia said that Sarah executes any plan that is given to her extremely well.

"She is the coolest headed competitor I have ever had," she said. "She simply doesn't get nervous. Ever. She trusts me, she trusts her horses, and she has as much natural horse sense as anyone I've ever had. I think she could improve any horse you put her on. Add to it that Dragonsmeade Varvatos is consistent, talented, and predictable."

The success of Alicia's riders across multiple divisions continued in Oklahoma's performance arena with Audra Lee. Audra was teamed with CBMF Random Hearts, a young mare that had only been shown twice before being paired with Audra at the end of 2013. Audra and "Heart" arrived at the 2016 Morgan Grand National under a tremendous amount of pressure. They had accumulated more wins than most young riders in the Morgan industry. They had won against older riders, Saddlebred riders, and at regional shows. They won the UPHA Junior Challenge Cup in 2014, and were the reigning



Alicia credits Sarah Hecht as the coolest headed competitor she has ever instructed. Here, Sarah and Dragonsmeade Varvatos pose with Dan Pavan, Maria Jose de la Hosa, Alicia Owens and Alan Hecht following their reserve world championship performance.



2016 was an incredible year for Alicia Owens including Scottfield Stables' move to her dream farm in Lenhartsville, Pa.

two-time Junior Saddle Seat Equitation World Champions. Alicia explained that Audra had barely completed the 2015 show season when people began to talk to her about contending for a third world title in the junior equitation division, something that had never been achieved before. This placed a large amount of stress on both rider and trainer going into 2016. Additionally, Alicia's move to her new facility meant that Audra's drive to the barn would increase from 25 minutes to two hours. Their proven routine of four lessons per week had to be tweaked given the new distance that Audra had to travel to get to the barn.

Yet despite these challenges, Audra and "Heart" were able to make history in Oklahoma City. Audra was named the Junior Saddle Seat Equitation World Champion for the third consecutive year. Her "three-peat" was extremely moving for Alicia. She said it was this journey specifically that taught her that preparing a rider mentally is just as important as preparing one physically.

"When she won this year I think I cried for 20 minutes," she said. "It was pure relief. Relief that she had done it for herself, relief that the move hadn't affected her negatively, and relief that the expectation that she should win was finally off our shoulders. Audra handled that moment with considerably more grace and poise than I did. They are a phenomenal team, and they are worth every effort."

It was evident that the bond that Audra and Alicia share extended beyond the show ring. Audra said her biggest struggle as a rider is that she psyches herself out, making her especially nervous going into her world championship class in Oklahoma. However, she explained that Alicia took her aside and told her that she had already given her everything that she could possibly ask for. Alicia told Audra to simply ride the class for herself and for Heart.

"She always knows what to say to me and

I think that's what really sets her apart from all the other instructors out there," Audra said. "Alicia has taught me so many lessons throughout the years, from teaching me how to connect with my horse to learning valuable life lessons that I'll carry with me for the rest of my life. Scottfield is my home away from home. Home is where Heart and Alicia are."

Audra and Heart will be one of the many teams instructed by Alicia that will once again return to the ring in 2017. Preparation is underway at Scottfield Stables, and business is booming. Alicia's new facility has 54 stalls available for boarding. The 42 horses in training work 5-7 days per week with Alicia, Dan, and Cat sharing jogging and lining duties, and Alicia doing all of the riding. There are four different outdoor workspaces at the new location that Alicia utilizes as much as possible to condition her horses.

Alicia gives more than 20 lessons on a typical Saturday, and 15-25 lessons during the week. Her local students come to ride 2-4 days out of the week, while those that come from out of town train for a couple weekends every month and stay on the farm for several days at a time. Alicia said that she would ideally like to have every rider take two school horse lessons and one show horse lesson each week, but her program is tailored to each rider depending on how far away they live. These lessons all contain work without stirrups and have an overview of the basics of riding each time. Alicia has also developed a precise regime for her equitation students.

"My equitation riders live on patterns once the weather breaks and we can get outside," she said. "I am very particular about patterns and the method I use to teach them, both for my horses and riders, so that piece takes the longest to teach. I have a specific program for the equitation riders, complete with a separate set of rules that I expect them

to follow. It's intense, but it has proven successful, and the girls never fail to rise to the challenge."

Alicia's proven success has not only spanned divisions, but different breeds as well. She has continued to train American Saddlebreds, and will once again have a strong group of this breed ready to go this year. It is a family affair for Ashley Russo, her daughter Renna, and her mother Candi, who all ride Saddlebreds under the Scottfield Stables banner. Ashley said that she couldn't imagine riding anywhere else than with Alicia.

"Alicia is not only a gifted trainer and an insightful instructor, she is also the consummate professional," she said. "Her dedication to her craft, her horses, and her people is second to none. She's honest, transparent, caring, and incredibly fun. Alicia creates an atmosphere that's infectious and makes everyone around her want to be the best version of themselves."

While it is evident that Alicia is well liked amongst her adoring clients at Scottfield Stables, she is also respected amongst the Morgan community. Her talents as a horsewoman are what helped her to be selected as the People's Choice Instructor of the Year. It is an honor that caps what has been an incredible year in Alicia's successful career.

"I don't know how we can possibly top 2016, but it seems like I think that every year," she said. "This time last year, I never would have guessed I would be living here, at a 62 acre dream farm, with a giant string of top show horses waiting for April to come. If I have learned nothing else this past year, it is that one should never underestimate how incredible their life can be. I feel like I have it all, and the best part is that I have so many phenomenal people to share my life with."