

Brenda Gauthier, Manitoba's Life Coach for Horse and Rider

Everybody agrees it's been a tough, cold Prairie winter. But it was a warm, sunny day, when I drove the short jaunt from Winnipeg to Richland Ranch. With the sunroof open and the radio turned up, I sang all the way to Grunthal; my hopeful spring ritual. Winter beaten corn stalks greeted me, poking out of the snow on either side of the long gravel driveway. There were no ruts to navigate on this new farm road, obviously just graded last fall. Green, pressure-treated hydro poles, led the way to the parking area, where I saw the bright red half ton bearing the ranch's name. To accommodate a growing clientele of horses and riders, Richland Ranch has recently taken up residence in dairy country, near Grunthal, Manitoba; its third move to larger digs in southern Manitoba. As I opened the heavy steel door, so new it had not yet been painted, I heard laughter. Turning a corner into the stable I soon found myself in a group, debating the hooves of a young Bay mare, cross-tied and quiet in front of us. Chad Plett, their good natured Ferrier, red faced and sweaty, had already tossed his flannel jacket to the floor. He had four more horses to trim, but this one needed some finessing. I thought it must be a nice break for him, working in this heated facility, where even the isle floors have radiant heat. Those metal Ferrier tools are tough to handle outside or in the isle of a drafty old barn on a winter visit. Kaluha, the Doberman, resident friend and watchdog, helped herself to half moon hoof cuttings, and wandered off to gnaw and lick her snack. When I mention her gentleness, her owner said you're right. But at night, alone to watch the barn, Kaluha is pure menace to any intruders.

Brenda Gauthier is as warm and engaging as I remember her, from the days when I boarded my mare at Richland Ranch in Anola. She quickly introduced me to everyone.

Brenda treats everybody that way. You may not be family, but its going to feel like it. She introduced me to Saskia Reutter, building owner and manager, since its completion in October 2008. Saskia comes from solid German stock, with a clan of dairy farmers on her husband's side. They planned, financed and built the facility using all that family wisdom. As a girl, Saskia and her family raised and were showing Welsh Cobs in Germany. So, when they moved to Canada, young, teenaged Saskia negotiated for a horse right away. That gelding still lives on her farm. Now, the mother of four horse lovers, the tradition continues, with seven horses of their own. Brenda Gauthier is Richland Ranch's resident trainer, breeder, consultant and life coach for horse and rider. These two women are a strong working team, who share a warm, unspoken respect for each other. They showed me rows of brand new box stalls, standing stalls, foaling pens and a huge bathing area. I visited the well stocked feed room and then the manure room. These barn hands never have to step outside to dump a wheelbarrow after mucking out stalls. They use a person door located at the end of the isle to access the huge manure room. Then, all the hauling happens through an outside overhead door. This is a design feature borrowed from the dairy business. Brenda brags that Saskia has overlooked nothing in the building design.

Brenda welcomes the excited new rider who climbs that mounting block for the very first time, and the experienced, athletic rider, who wants to streamline their technique or improve their competition scores. Brenda can sell you a horse, train your horse if it's not ready, teach horse and rider how to be a team and she can breed your horse with their resident quarter horse or Arab stud. Boarding, hauling, tack sales and specialized feed options are also on the menu at Richland Ranch. This full service approach to horse

ranching is what sets her apart from the competition. Brenda knows western horse and rider in her bones. Not content to simply instruct, Brenda is an accomplished competitor in her own right, with trophies and ribbons in western pleasure, reining, and barrels. These are her main focus, but she dabbles in other competition types, when time permits.

A vision of Richland Ranch may have been born when, at age three, Brenda Gauthier rode her first pony named Goldie. Her 38 year career began at age nine, when Brenda talked management into letting her walk thoroughbreds at Assiniboine Downs. With growing confidence and a natural horse sense, she negotiated herself a job as summer barn help at Dorothy Lake in the Whiteshell, quickly winning the approval of the owners. She soon graduated from barn help, to leading hour long trail rides. Born and bred in Winnipeg's Westwood area, the twelve year old city girl moved to Anola, Manitoba with her family. Brenda's Dad was Project Manager for the Royal Canadian Mint and her Mom was a professional seamstress, working from home. Brenda says the move to the country was logical for their outdoor-loving family, who gave up their city life and cottage property to live in Anola. Years later, Richland Ranch would be born in Anola. Brenda credits husband, Ray Gauthier, with the construction of both Anola sites, both located a few miles south of Highway 15. She proudly calls him the Bricks and Mortar Guy, saying that they built the ranch themselves, with help from community members and friends. Boarders from that time still remember the excitement as each piece was completed. With each visit to the stable, boarders would coo over new saddle racks, tack lockers, a new corral and, perhaps best of all, the new flush toilet in the barn.

November 18, 1993 was a lazy Sunday, during rifle hunting season. Brenda was out on a solo ride; a rare thing for a busy horse rancher. It was one of those chilly days before the snow, the ground soggy from autumn rain. Brenda was riding in a field near her home, when a bullet whizzed by, too close to ignore. A tall mare at 16 hands high, Sierra was always laid back, but bullets changed that. She bolted and bucked hard. Brenda lost one stirrup. Then after holding on for several bucks, Brenda was finally catapulted over the mare's head, landing on the back of her neck, the sickening sound of her back breaking, echoing in her ears. Lying stunned on the soggy ground, she knew she must crawl back to the house. Slowly and painfully, she made her way there. Her ten year old daughter, Alanna, was frightened to find her Mother on the ground outside their home. Brenda needed to calm and reassure her, before Alanna could make the phone call to a neighbour. The ride to the hospital was the worst car ride of Brenda's life. Anyone would assume that this would be the end of Brenda's riding career. With a broken neck and back, the prospect of a long rehabilitation period and possibly even a new learned fear of riding, the end of her career seemed logical. Friends and family were no doubt thinking this was the end of her work. Instead, despite doctor's orders for a longer rest, Brenda was on her feet in a week. The combination of boredom and missing her horses, got her out of bed. Family members watched and worried, as she began her own early rehabilitation, shuffling her feet, bent over in pain. In a real life Manitoba miracle, Brenda was back on a horse five months later. Riders who seek to regain or improve core strength, balance and flexibility can use horseback riding as physiotherapy. The side to side and front to back rolling motion of the horse's body provides gentle treatment for the rider. Careless humans caused the accident, but

her horses helped Brenda return to a regular riding schedule, although she says she lives with daily pain now.

Brenda Gauthier says she takes her lessons from the horses. She watches the way horses teach and discipline each other, by working in herds of up to fifty animals at a time. Brenda also respects the work of National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) champ, Dean Brown, having attended some of his clinics. Brenda is well known for her ability to match horse and rider by personality. Riders from across the Prairies seek her out for training and consultations. Perhaps less well known is the fact that Brenda is a mentor to and an advocate for young girls, who share her passion for horses. She invites them to come and work in the barn, to watch lessons, and to attend summer horse camps. Brenda immediately recognizes the benefits, evidenced in the girl's growing confidence. Brenda empowers horse and rider, whatever their age. Parents often thank her for positive changes they see in their children, from improved marks in school, to better behaviour at home. Brenda has witnessed this in her own child and in foster children she parented over the years. While Brenda will take credit for her part in teaching her students, she gives more credit to the horses that train and correct the rider, in the stable, on the arena floor and out on the trails.

The high energy and relaxed excitement at Richland Ranch seems to inspire riders and equine residents alike. Brenda's infectious love of horses makes her students want to learn and do their best. Even visitors find themselves caught up in the fun of learning with horses. More than once a visitor who came to watch, has returned with plans to buy their own horse and begin some riding lessons with Brenda. When the riding is done, many want to linger, maybe picking up a broom, or watching the Ferrier ply his

craft. My personal preference is to grab some grooming brushes, pick a horse and start brushing. Their scent on my hands and clothes is sweet perfume to me, and Brenda has sometimes joked that if we could bottle that popular scent, we'd make a fortune.

Brenda walked me back to the big steel door, and leaned out into the warm breeze. It was late in the day with the sun throwing its golden, afternoon light over trees and snow. I smiled and thanked her. Brenda nodded, looking out across the fields in front of us. With a sigh and a smile she said, Yup, I live every single day fully. I don't take anything for granted. Richland Ranch's Brenda Gauthier is a no nonsense horse woman with smarts, whose life work is partnering with horses and mentoring those who ride them. Brenda has learned life lessons in the saddle, on the back trails and in the arena. She says she will never quit horses. Her students and horses will tell you, that they won't quit her either.

By Brenda Pauls
March 2009