

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM.....ISN'T

Fulfilling a dream, especially one that seems impossible is one of the most rewarding experiences anyone can have. It's even better when it becomes your family's dream and you can share it with them as well.

My family has been blessed with the opportunity to design, build, and now run a dude ranch called Stagecoach Trails Guest Ranch in Northwestern Arizona. We also have the distinct honor of being the nation's first and only completely handicapped accessible ranch. This is our dream. We are living proof that if you believe in a dream and go after it, you can make it come true. The impossible dream really isn't!

My dream started 41 years ago, when I was about 10 years old. I loved to read books and I also loved horses. My favorite stories were Trixie Belden mysteries. Trixie Belden is very similar to Nancy Drew except her mysteries revolved around horses. Since I was a horse lover but was not able to own one when I was young, I lived through Trixie and her best friend Honey's mystery adventures on horseback. One of her adventures is called "The Mystery in Arizona". Trixie, Honey and their siblings visit an Arizona dude ranch, solving a mystery while they are there. I think I read that story about a hundred times (no exaggeration!) and I told myself "when I grow up, I am going to own a dude ranch just like Trixie Belden stayed at!" (That book sits proudly on display in our lodge as a reminder of where my dream began.)

My family's dream started seventeen years ago when we took our first dude ranch vacation together in Colorado. I thought this would be a perfect time to see what dude ranches were all about since I had not been at one yet. Unfortunately we had to leave our oldest daughter Amy behind because there weren't any accessible ranches available. Amy has Cerebral Palsy and is in a wheelchair. It was very difficult to bring her on family vacations because of the accessibility issues and dude ranches were no exception. But we took our other two children, Jeremy and Vicki who were 13 and 9 at the time. We had such a wonderful time at the ranch. We decided during our visit that this was definitely something our family wanted to do together. We loved the family atmosphere and the wonderful opportunity to meet so many people from all over the world. And the horses, of course! My dream was suddenly becoming their dream! But we lived in Wisconsin at the time, and western dude ranches don't thrive in a Midwestern environment. So we decided to wait until our children were older. Then we could move somewhere else to build the ranch and they could really be part of it. But the seed had been planted in all of our hearts.

About 12 years ago, I felt it was time to go after our dream. My husband was ready for a change from his job, and I was feeling the need to do something different with my life. And our children were now old enough to be a real part of the ranch. God had been blessing our family and I now wanted to give something back. I had been a travel agent for 12 years and had traveled to Arizona often. Since I loved the heat, mountains, and wide-open spaces, I thought this would be the perfect place to open our dude ranch, especially since this was where Trixie Belden had stayed during her dude ranch experience. When I approached Dan about it one night, he was all for it. I knew it was time to go after our dream. Most importantly, our children were ready to join us. We knew we couldn't do it without them so I was thrilled when they agreed to join us.

We decided the only way to determine if this was really what we wanted to do; we had to stay at an Arizona dude ranch, including Amy this time since she was going to be part of this new life. Unfortunately, I couldn't find one who was able or willing to accommodate Amy. I was frustrated because I knew Amy was a big part of our decision in determining if this was the new life we wanted. Finally, after making one last phone call I found a ranch that, although they weren't accessible, they said they would do everything they could to insure we had a wonderful vacation. So we decided to give them a chance and booked a week's stay. The owners were wonderful and although we struggled with the inaccessibility of the ranch, we had a fantastic time. Most importantly, Amy had the best time of her life. I watched her interact with the guests and saw the smile on her face whenever she rode a horse. She didn't want to go home. I knew then this would be a great life for her.

The idea came to me at that time that we needed to create a ranch that was entirely handicapped accessible. This way, families with disabled loved ones like us could come, vacation together and not have to worry about barriers anymore. But we had to build it carefully so all of our guests would enjoy it whether they were disabled or not. This was going to be a very special ranch for very special people where everyone would feel welcome. I also knew that God had a plan for our family and He was taking us to Arizona.

Once the decision was made to go after our dream, the difficult part began. It's always easy to dream, but it is never easy to go after that dream. Not only did I have to convince the bank we had a great idea so we could finance the project (no, we did not have a rich uncle or a large inheritance), but we also had to leave our family, friends and home in Wisconsin and start a whole new life. With God's help, we knew we could do it.

I wrote my own business plan, did my own research and knocked on many bank doors. I knew someone else out there would believe in our dream and help us make it come true. Finally, after months of phone calls and conversations with financial institutions I found someone who was willing to finance our project. Gregory Derhaag put together an SBA loan for us that would enable our dream to come true. He also helped us secure additional financing through another bank since SBA would only finance part of our loan. If it weren't for Gregory's faith in me and my family's dream, Stagecoach Trails would not be here today.

We spent endless hours designing and creating the ranch with my brother Randy, who is an architectural designer. We were very careful to insure the accessibility of every building and every room, including all the bathrooms. Having personal experience with Amy, we felt we could put ourselves in the shoes of all of our guests and create a place that truly was barrier free. We were also careful to create a dude ranch where the accessibility was subtle. We wanted all able-bodied guests to feel welcome as well. It was to be a dude ranch first and foremost-it just happens to be accessible! Randy spent a lot of time in Arizona with us during this process. The more he was here the more he fell in love with it. So, he moved here to help with the construction process and stayed around many years to be our cook.

However great the dream was, the journey was not easy. There were many days of frustration, despair, worry and doubts. (Ye of little faith!) Just days before we made the big move out west, I received a phone call from the bank that was financing our additional loan funds. They were pulling out for unknown reasons. I couldn't believe this was happening! I called Gregory in a panic because we were only days away from giving up everything we had to move out west and start our new life. I saw our dream fading away quickly. (Ye of very little faith!) He told me not to worry. Make the move and he

would find another bank. So we sold our house, packed up our belongings, said goodbye to our family and friends and made the 2,000-mile journey to Arizona. Within days Gregory had found us another bank. We were once again on our way to fulfilling our dream. We rented a home in nearby Lake Havasu City and began finalizing plans for building the ranch.

After months of planning, building and countless hours of hard work by every family member and lots of determination, Stagecoach Trails Guest Ranch opened its doors on December 6th, 2000. Those first several months were difficult as we had very few guests and lots of bills to pay. I spent countless hours wondering about that phrase “if you build it they will come!” I kept thinking maybe they don’t come if you build it in the middle of nowhere! But I kept praying and suddenly they started coming!

With patience, faith and lots of hard work we have created an environment where everyone feels welcome here. We work very hard to make everyone feel like family when they stay at our ranch. The response has been overwhelming. We have hosted guests from all over the United States and the world already! Our “ranch family” continues to grow every day and we continue to thank God for blessing us with this opportunity to live our dream and to create such a wonderful place for so many people to enjoy.

Stagecoach Trails sits on 320 acres in northwestern Arizona. The surrounding land is still relatively untouched and looks like the true “Wild West”. It is surrounded by three beautiful mountain ranges and adjoins approximately 360,000 acres of federal land. Our riding opportunities are endless and the views are spectacular. The ranch accommodates up to 40 guests. We serve three delicious meals daily in our southwestern dining room. We also have spacious guest rooms (every one is accessible), a swimming pool and hot tub (with a chair lift so disabled guests can use them too), a beautiful western lodge to hang out in, and an outstanding riding program both for able-bodied and disabled riders. We offer slow, scenic rides, intermediate trotting rides as well as advanced loping rides and 4 hour lunch rides for those guests who want to be in the saddle longer.

We have a wheelchair ramp that enables all of our disabled guests the opportunity to ride. (Even our senior riders like to use it!) We can take them riding in the arena or out on trails and we provide sidewalkers for a safe and memorable ride. The family can go along on the rides too, which really makes it meaningful for our disabled guests and their families. There are no curbs, stairs or barriers either.

Another unique aspect of our ranch is that we own many gaited horses. As an avid lover of gaited horses (my two personal horses are both Tennessee Walkers), I know how important it is for my guests to enjoy that wonderful glide ride. So I have gone to great lengths to purchase many Tennessee Walkers (my personal favorite!), Missouri Fox Trotters, a Paso Fino and a Kentucky Mountain horse. Of the 58 horses we own, 27 of them are gaited. And of course they are the most requested horses at the ranch! We often offer our guests “gaited horse rides” where they can experience the wonderful smooth glide ride without having to worry about my non-gaited horses keeping up. I have often had an E-mail from guests telling me they have purchased their own Tennessee Walker after riding one of mine. That’s always great to hear as I know how much I love my own Tennessee Walkers.

This ranch may have been my dream but Amy is the true inspiration for the barrier free part of Stagecoach Trails Guest Ranch. We’ve created our ranch so that everyone including people like Amy can enjoy a ranch vacation and at the same time created an environment where everyone really does

feel welcome. I always tell my able-bodied guests “even though you don’t need the accessibility, you are going to love those large guest rooms and bathrooms!” They benefit from all that extra space too!

Our ranch truly is a family affair. The success comes with the help of each family member, including myself, my husband Dan, my children, Amy, Jeremy and Vicki, Jeremy’s wife Jodi, Vicki’s husband Tony, my brother Randy and my wranglers Craig, Jef, & Scott. My children have sacrificed so much to help build this dream and I will be forever grateful to them. This ranch would not survive without them. We all work very hard together to create our special ranch atmosphere. I am so very proud of what my family has created. I thank God every day for the unique opportunity He has provided us. What started out as my dream has now become everyone’s dream and that makes it even more special. Most importantly, our ranch has provided a wonderful new life for Amy. She has gained independence and happiness at the ranch. Life is good for Amy in Arizona!

Seeing the smiles on the faces of all our guests, especially the disabled guests who are able to get around the ranch so easily, makes all the long hours and hard work worth it. It is so rewarding and the best part of running the ranch. Disabilities are no longer an issue here. My motto is “everyone has a disability; some are just more visual than others!” With that thought in mind, our able-bodied guests have learned that everyone deserves to have a wonderful time at our ranch whether you are disabled or not. Even during the weeks we have no disabled guests, Amy is always around. She makes sure everyone feels comfortable and welcome here.

I will never forget a wonderful note that was written in our guest book by a woman who had brought her disabled granddaughter to the ranch right after we opened. It reads “After the glitzy lights of Las Vegas, we thought this would be a real let down but we found the true stars right here at the ranch.” If I ever get discouraged all I have to do is reread this and the countless other wonderful remarks our guests have written to us and I know we are right where we are supposed to be. And we recently were awarded 2 top Trip Advisor awards in 2005-something else we are quite proud of since these awards are based solely on guests’ reviews our ranch through the Trip Advisor website.

I have even taken my love and inspiration of Trixie Belden one step further. I recently bought my own black horse like the one ridden in the books and yes; his name is Jupiter (Jupe for short) after his counterpart! And he is a Tennessee Walker of course! I only wish Julie Campbell (the wonderful author of the first six Trixie books who passed away in July 1999) was still alive so I could tell her how much she has inspired my life and my dream!

Our motto is “You’ll come as guests and leave feeling like family”. We take pride in giving our guests the opportunity to be part of our ranch family, even if it is for only a little while. And you know what we say about family- “family always comes back for visits so once you become part of our ranch family you must come back!” If you would like more information, please check out our website at: www.stgr.com or call us at 1-866-444-4471. We’d love to have you become part of our ranch family too. Thanks so much for letting me share my dream come true with you.

By: Carrie Rynders (Owner of Stagecoach Trails Guest Ranch)