

# **My Anna**

*by Heather Sansom*

My sister's oldest daughter, Anna, is twelve. Like many girls her age, she likes pretty hair things for her long brown hair, trying my makeup and nail polish, and everything related to horses and ponies. Anna has a pony of her own she named Angel, and already gives "riding lessons" to the neighborhood children. She rides faithfully several times a week, and helps her younger siblings with their Shetland pony. Anna puts in several hours a day helping with family farm chores. In the past four years, she has not wavered in her stated career ambition of becoming a riding instructor. Anna's extraordinarily long hair, her willingness to help with her baby brothers and sister and with all the manual work around the farm, and her clear goals are not the only things that make Anna different from many children her age.

Anna was diagnosed with a learning disability before she was school age. Both my sister and brother-in-law live with mild disabilities which have a serious impact on their options in life. Both my sister and brother are "simple" in the sense that they do not have the ability to think far ahead, or in long strings of causality or probability. They live very much in the present, and in the concrete. They met in high school at a 'special needs' group where my sister had decided to volunteer some help, and where my brother-in-law was enrolled instead of being in regular classes. When they were first married, they tried life on their own in an apartment, but the experience was difficult for them to manage. My mother lives with them to help.

My sister is gifted in math and has learned that with patience she can accomplish much. She keeps the books for the family business, and home-schools her children, but is not able to think in higher abstract terms and has a motor-skill disability which causes her reactions times to be significantly delayed. She has, for example, a permanently fat lip from persisting in learning to ride a bicycle, even though falling off meant her face would hit the ground before her hands could react to stop the fall.

My sister's disability is the result of a childhood accident, while my brother-in-law was born with a very strong "kinetic" learning ability, but strong handicap for other learning abilities. My brother-in-law is physically very well-coordinated: his claim to fame in high school was being the best 'white guy' break-dancer. He finally learned to read at age twenty-one, when my sister taught him because he had fallen between the cracks in the public school system which, with its classroom structure and emphasis

on book learning, did not at all meet his needs. Because of my sister's patience and persistence, he can now read grocery lists, medications and feed instructions, and takes pride in inching his way through newspaper articles and shorter Bible passages. Reading comes with great difficulty for him.

Her parents' handicaps impact Anna in two main ways. They do not have a lot in material resources, and live by running a labor-intensive bird raising business supplying pet-stores, and by managing their landlord's sheep. Ordinarily, they would never be able to afford luxuries like ponies for the children, but because they are on a farm, they can keep the ponies.

Secondly, Anna has inherited her father's difficulty with book learning. She manages to keep up with her grade level because she is home-schooled and has one-on-one attention from both my sister and my mother, who lives with them, and a tailored program. The painful tasks of reading are interspersed with physical activity (riding is a main one!) and other exercises more suited to her learning abilities, such as drawing (usually horses!), and talking through topics from the curriculum. She has difficulty moving in her mind from the abstraction of letters strung together on a page, to ideas, to concrete things with meaning. Unlike children her age, she has not read *Black Beauty*. She cannot at this time get through a book of any length, even on a topic of great interest. Anna still does not speak in paragraphs, and did not start using full sentences until quite late. While not a hyperactive child, she cannot stay focused for long on a single topic.

Anna is transfixed by horses and will sit literally for hours at a horse show, watching horse after horse go through basic level dressage tests. She will comment on things like the colours, how much one may move like her own pony, or the different tack which she may not have seen before. She remembers names of people and people's pets and horses which might have been mentioned to her once years earlier.

Her responses to my questions on the phone are often monosyllabic, but she will remember that my colt had a scratch the last time we talked, and she will ask about the scratch, and want to know about his latest growth stage or what I was working on in my last ride. It is almost as if Anna needs help connecting dots at first, but once she knows the connection, she can be counted on to remember it. She doesn't cut corners grooming and bandaging, and shows her two-year-old baby brother how to correctly brush the Shetland. She knows which bridle and saddle is for which horse, and how to tack them up, and which horses are out with whom, at what times and in their correct paddocks, and helps daily with turnout.

Anna first sat on a horse when she was two. My mother still had some of the horses we had grown up with, and my sister's childhood Welsh pony was still alive. They were all in their twenties, which made them safe mounts for a toddler to be led around on, and eventually to learn the basics of equitation at walk, trot, canter and over eighteen-inch fences. By the time Anna was ten, the old pony had died and she no longer had a mount her size.

When I had been her age, we had owned a Shetland pony which my mother let us ride around the lawn unobserved for hours. With my sister's disability, the pony was a safe height from which to fall, and indeed, mom started us off with lessons on "tuck and roll" where she would take a leg or foot on one side, and shove us off the pony. My sister did learn to roll safely from this low height. From our point of view, we had hours of valuable freedom and independence as our Shetland became Roy Roger's horse Trigger, Flicka, and a wild Indian pony streaking around the house.

I badly wanted Anna to have an experience of independence and an opportunity to love a pony with abandon, and without being always instructed. I wanted her to learn to fall off, and to get a good seat and develop training skills from bombing around bareback on a horse with a mind of its own. In addition, her younger sister, Josie, then four, was showing a clear desire to have a horse by daily borrowing Anna's riding hat to go for rides on her rocking horse or hobby horse.

It occurred to me that out of all the likely options for Anna, work around horses is not only her most significant interest, but it is going to be the most attainable income option for her as she grows up. It was also fairly clear that horses weren't going to be a passing phase for little Josie, either. So I bought them an unbroken four-year-old, copper penny red Shetland pony with a mind of its own. I wouldn't have taken such a risk if it wasn't for the fact that my mother, also a horse trainer, lives with them and could work with Anna daily until the pony was thoroughly started. The pony was as saucy as they come, but a sweetheart by nature. You could sit on him while he lay in his stall, and he would practically do cartwheels for carrot bits. I tested him out by walking and bumping into his hind legs and hind end, and exposing him to all manner of treatment he would likely get: hair pulling and body parts under his feet. While he was only halter-broken, I stood straddling the pony with my feet on the ground and gently lowered my body to make contact with his back. He nuzzled my knee.

He is absolutely gorgeous, with a wild, thick mane and forelock, and a huge wide space between his enormous liquid brown eyes, a deeply dished face and tiny little muzzle. They named him Applesauce, and Applesauce became Anna's first "real" ride. Instead of merely learning to

sit on a moving elderly schoolmaster, she would now have to learn to think with the horse, and apply discipline and patience at the right times. She would also have to learn to deal with naughty behavior from time to time, as it turned out that what we thought was a gelding was actually a “rig” who liked to rear at other horses two and three times his size. Anna’s feet were nearly dragging to the ground, so he was not big enough to seriously harm her with a buck or other evasion.

At first my mother objected, reminding me the pony was too small for Anna, and too green for Josie. I felt my mother was seriously missing the point, and my sister thought a small pony for all the children was marvelous. Josie at this stage was only being led around at a walk with someone holding her around the waist. She delighted in brushing Applesauce for long periods of time, while Anna went through the stages of “breaking” a horse under my mother’s guidance. Once he was broken, Anna was able to ride him around the yard unobserved for the first time in her life.

Now Anna has a bigger pony which she also participated in breaking, and both Josie and Anna are able to ride their ponies in shared lessons. My mother is teaching them basic equitation from a dressage foundation, and Anna is beginning to learn how to properly collect and bend her pony, and some basic leg-yielding. Because of her learning disability, Anna takes longer to ‘get’ some concepts. She has been working at posting trot for several years, and still gets her diagonals mixed.

I am grateful for circumstances which make my mother available to teach her, and which allow the family to keep ponies for the children, giving them hours of fun together as a family. Anna has the opportunity to be someone, to form and pursue a dream, to have regular physical activity outdoors and to learn all the good 4-H values: head, heart, hands and health. She is learning the value of hard work, persistence and responsibility as she becomes a competent little rider and trainer. In addition to ensuring Anna does progress through the grade levels appropriate to her age, home-schooling helps shelter Anna from the ridicule and ostracization she would experience in the public school system due to her disability, often mis-matched clothes, and lack of common experience and ability in other children’s sports and games. Through riding, she has friends with common interest, and her siblings and neighborhood children think that she is pretty cool. Her pony is one of her best friends.

Several months ago, Anna proudly informed me that her new pony Angel, who had been bought at a local auction and has paint markings under her grey coat, is a “dressage pony”, and that they will be going in the big horse show at the place I took them to watch the previous year (the former York

Equestrian Centre outside of Toronto, Ontario). I think there will be a schooling show there, and a friend will trailer them in for the day.

When I see Anna, I don't see what she doesn't have. I see a little girl with the longest brown hair who loves horses and knows who she is, and knows she is loved. I'm already making plans for when she outgrows Angel.

*Heather Sansom*

