

There is no secret so close as that between rider and horse.

— R.S. Surtees

Angel

The Arabian horse shared the tent of its Bedouin owner, shared the workload of its family, and at night, one might imagine its warm belly and gentle heart serving its human partners as both pillow and confidante. Centuries of selective breeding went into crafting a horse whose beauty is matched only by its empathy to the needs of others.

Today, under cancer warrior Tracy Kujawa's broad tent of goodwill at Angel Heart Farm, in Lexington, Kentucky, Arabian horses continue to share their power to heal and help.

KHURYIA

A little over a decade ago, life threw Kujawa, a wardrobe stylist in the music industry, a curve ball. Actually it was a mean, fast, hard ball: As she was facing her mother's imminent death from cancer, she learned of her own diagnosis.

"My parents were Michigan farmers. I have never seen two people work so hard but be so happy. They inspired me to do my best and follow my heart. When I was diagnosed with cancer, my mom was dying. I just couldn't let my parents know about my illness."

Instead, she sought out her Arabian mare, Khuryia, went inside her stall, and cried. Everything she could not say to her parents she said to her horse.

"Khuryia was my light. I was scared, but I knew I could — and would — beat it."

Six months after losing her mother, her heart-broken father also died. And her cancer returned. "Again, Khuryia helped me through it."

SHE HAD A DREAM

Turning to horses comes naturally to this 45 year-old horsewoman. Her father bought her first pony the day she was born, and she still recalls her first four-legged Christmas gift: an Arabian/Welsh crossbred, called Ponytown Cris.

"Under the tree was a pink halter and lead rope. I thought it was for my other pony." Until, during morning barn chores before church, she found "the prettiest pony in the world with a red bow around her neck. I screamed so loud I think I scared her!"

Cris graduated her young rider from the 4-H ranks, and as Kujawa entered her early 20s and began working as a fashion stylist, she bought her first purebred Arabian, HL (Horse-shoe Lake) Windolyn. "Then I leased a mare named Khirby, and bred her to HL Park Avenue+++/, and that led to my mare, Khuryia."

Call it what you will: the subconscious culmination of a lifetime of horses or a divine inspiration. One night, as Kujawa was undergoing her cancer treatment, she had a dream: "I was teaching bald-headed children to ride."

She woke up and got to work.

ON ANGEL'S WINGS

Her initial research was as enlightening as her vision: "I wanted to see if there were programs that served children with life-threatening illnesses. There was not a one in Tennessee or Kentucky. So, I thought, I will start one!"

"Little did I know what was involved in starting a nonprofit. First, I called Children's Vanderbilt (hospital) in Nashville, and Saint Jude's in Memphis, to see if they thought such a program would benefit children. They thought it was a great idea. That's when I quit my business to start Angel Heart Farm. I had no idea how to start, what a board of directors did, or how I was supposed to pay for this idea, but after ten years, I think I am getting the hang of it!"

In 2001, the program took its first steps towards making her dream reality. To date, Angel Heart Farm and its equine-assisted therapy program has served more than 150 children and families. "We teach children to ride, groom and care for the horses and ponies. Some actually like to clean stalls! Our children have shown in A-rated Arabian shows, and locally in lead-line and walk-trot."

The AHF program also incorporates music and art. "We've written songs — from country to rap — and each equine angel has their own song!" Kujawa grins. "I think we need to

Heart Farm

BY L.A. POMEROY

where dreams
come true



Emma Gill, 12, on AHF's 26-year-old Arabian, CS Splendor. Emma won her first class on Splendor, riding in memory of her brother, Caleb, who had passed away a week earlier.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO HELP

If you want to help Angel Heart Farm or a therapeutic riding program in your area, the Wish List below gives you an idea of what they need.

For Kids/Families

(The cost of sponsoring a child is just \$150).

- Gas cards
- Gift cards (Target, Walmart)
- Cowboy boots
- Riding gloves
- Riding helmets

For the Farm/Horses

(The cost of sponsoring a horse or pony is just \$1,500, which helps offset farrier and veterinary services, medications, board, and keeping the Angel Crew healthy and happy).

- Dover Saddlery gift cards
- Tractor Supply gift cards
- Home Depot or Costco gift cards
- Shavings
- Good grass hay
- Carrots and apples
- Cat food

Volunteers are also always welcome! To donate, contact Tracy Kujawa at tkujawa@netzero.net, or visit www.angelheartfarm.net.

do a CD.” That’s not impossible for a woman who has kept her music industry connections. One of the children’s favorite mounts, Rocky, was gifted by Grammy award-winning country music legend, Alan Jackson, and his family.

THE POWER OF ARABIANS

Kujawa unabashedly describes her ‘equine angels’ as “six of the sweetest Arabians in the world (plus three Welsh ponies, a Shetland, and a Miniature). They are the most beautiful, kindest, and giving animals ever made.

“I think God gave the Arabian horse something extra. I have seen amazing things happen between our kids and horses. Khuryia, is very full of herself, but when I was sick, she took care of me, and with our kids, she is a loving caregiver. Her colt, Nash, named by one of our little girls who has since gone to heaven, has been around children since the day he was born.” (Nash, joined by AHF stablemates Rocky and Cisco, can also be seen in the movie, “Pure Country 2: The Gift,” directed by Christopher Cain and released in 2010 starring (among others), the King of Country, George Strait.)

“We also have an Arabian gelding, Chester’s Mahogany, who suffers from Cushing’s disease. When I tell children about his condition, and that he has to take medicine and eat special things to help him feel good, they build an even deeper bond with him. He’s not fancy, but he tries hard to make each child happy. We took him to a show with one of our young riders in a Walk-Trot class, and he set that little head, and was as perfect as could be, and won the class! Natasha, his rider, had been diagnosed with a brain tumor (she is now in remission). She said Chester helped her through

everything and, if he was a real boy, she would go on a date with him.”

Kujawa smiles. “When I tell people we have Arabians in our program they look at me and say, ‘Aren’t they high-spirited for therapy horses?’ I respond that they have the biggest hearts, and are the perfect horses, for Angel Heart Farm.”

FROM THE HORSE’S MOUTH

Young people and parents, as well as hospitals and officials that have worked with the farm, agree that good works and good horses go together here.

“When your child is diagnosed with cancer, you try to find what good can come out of such a horrible event. One of our biggest ‘goods’ is Angel Heart Farm,” says Amy Scherer, of Nolensville, Tennessee, whose son, Cameron, was four years old when he began chemotherapy treatments.



This little AHF cowboy was Cainan Celtner, at age 8.

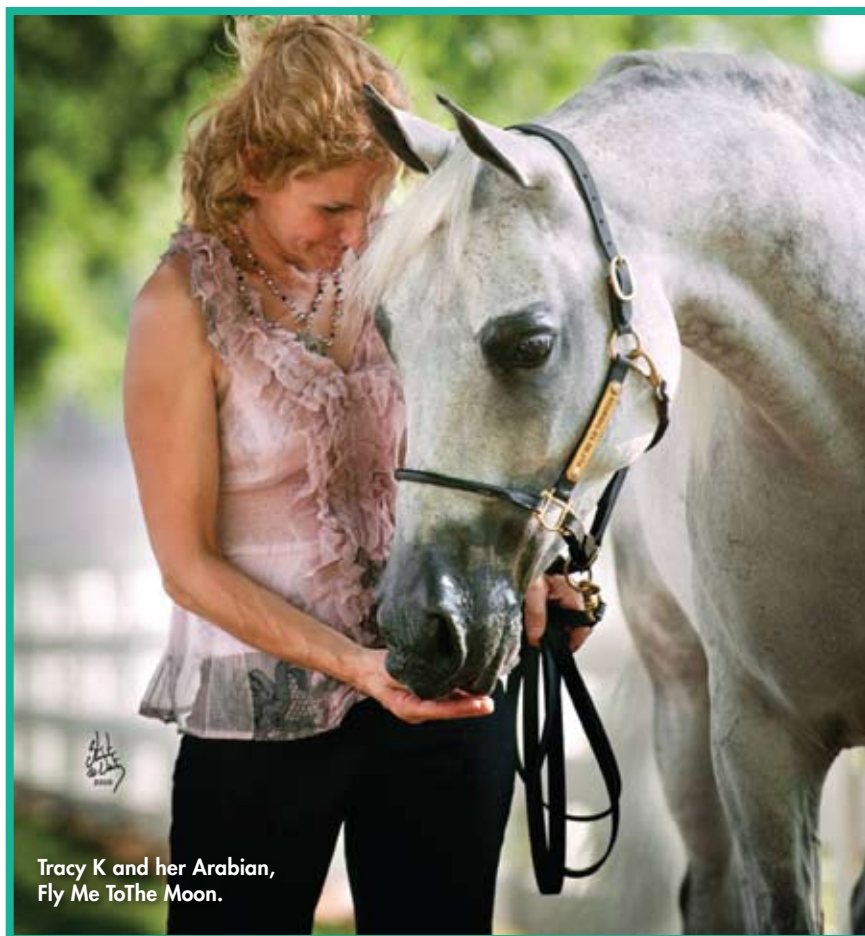
“After one particularly bad round, my sweet son did not have the desire to get off the couch. I was desperate to motivate him to participate in life. That is when I called Angel Heart. We went two days later, and I realized immediately this place was a gift.

“When Cameron felt horrible, he still found energy to ride his favorite horse, Rocky. This time was also precious to me. I had a few hours’ respite from the hardest job of my life, and my son was happy and laughing. Cameron has learned to ride and care for a horse. He has won trophies. His favorite shoes are cowboy boots given to him at the farm. We have met other cancer families at the farm instead of a hospital room. Bottom line, we will forever be grateful to Angel Heart Farm.”

Anderson B. Collier, III, MD, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, served on the AHF board of directors. “I have been involved with the farm for several years. I am also a Pediatric Oncologist at Vanderbilt, where the majority of patients are treated. I can attest personally and professionally to the positive impact Angel Heart has for patients and families. It’s common for parents to tell me they are going to the farm after treatment at the hospital.”

An AHF board member and, for four years, its medical advisor, Richard H. Ho, MD, MSCI, of the Pediatric Hematology/Oncology departments at Vanderbilt, has praised Angel Heart and its horses: “Studies have shown that pet therapy can improve mental and physical health, shorten recovery time, and decrease stress and incidents of depression in children and adults.

“Through interaction with animals, children are empowered to be care-



Tracy K and her Arabian,
Fly Me ToThe Moon.

givers instead of care recipients. The goal of Angel Heart has been to improve the lives of children with animal-assisted therapy, in conjunction with physician-ordered treatment. Anecdotal, I can attest to its positive impact. Tracy and her volunteers have done a wonderful job creating a safe haven where children bond with horses and participate in their care, which projects a positive impact on their own healing and recuperation.”

FROM DREAM TO DREAM FARM

In June 2010, the program moved from its original Nashville site to Lexington, Kentucky. “There are three Children’s Hospitals within an hour or less of Lexington, and three — UK Children’s, Cincinnati Children’s, and Kaiser — in Louisville. I knew we could serve more children and families in need,” she says.

Kujawa’s newest angels are the Matt and Carolyn Shively family, who have free-leased their Elk Hill Farm, to AHF. “It is a dream farm,” she says. “Perfect, black plank fencing, beautiful paddocks, and a barn that’s very special, too.

“Lexington is amazing. There are horses on every corner, and the best veterinary clinics in the world. I have been with Rood and Riddle Equine Clinic for over ten years, and it is nice to have them minutes, instead of hours, away. And I’m still just three hours from my trainer, Ashton Kiesner.”

As busy as compassion keeps her, Kujawa still makes time to improve as a rider. “I have been blessed to have Ashton as my trainer for three years. She has given me so much confidence in the ring. Things she has taught me have enabled me to teach my kids better horsemanship.”



(where the U.S. World Equestrian Games Endurance team trained). “It’s a great place to host an event!”

Last but not least is the biggest dream of all: Purchasing the first “Angel House.” Modeled after the Ronald McDonald House, it will offer out-of-state families a place to spend a night or weekend free of charge. “Having an ill child is a huge expense. We want to have a place where they can stay, instead of paying for a hotel.”

Angel Heart Farm does not charge families any fees for its programs and is a completely free service. “With so many bills our beautiful families incur, we strongly believe in keeping this service free, so we do not accept any donations from our families.”

IMITATION AS THE SINCEREST FLATTERY

“I do not know one person that has not been touched by cancer,” says Kujawa, noting that 46 children are diagnosed daily with the disease.

Earlier this year, at the Middle Tennessee Arabian Horse Association Music City Show in Nashville, she had a long conversation with Christine

In 2010, Kujawa and her show horse, Fly Me To The Moon, had their first Top Five finish in AHA Region 14. “I am still smiling,” she says.

Angel Heart has grown to meet an ever-increasing need for its services, and its operating expenses have increased, too. Kujawa estimates that, to run its program efficiently and effectively, it costs about \$175,000 a year.

“Cisco and Chester are my ‘high maintenance angels,’ as both need special shoeing, medication, and feed for their Cushings’s. We use pelleted shavings in stalls as children with cystic fibrosis and asthma have a hard time dealing with extra dust, so this is one way we try to cut down. Even though it is more expensive, it is worth it.

“The budget for the farm includes everything from medications, feed, vet services, birthday parties and showing expenses for the kids, to assisting in funeral services, if needed.”

AHF’s first goal in Lexington is to raise funds for a small, heated indoor arena so its children can ride year-round. “No rain or snow can keep our angels from doing their job. The indoor is our main need at the present time, but we also need financial contributions. I write a lot of grants!”

AHF is working with Keeneland Race Track to present a Cowboy

Ball at Keene Barn in Spring 2011. “The Ball will have a live and silent auction, dinner and spirits, and major country artists to perform so folks can dance the night away while helping a great program. One year, Barbara and Kix Brooks (of the country duo, Brooks & Dunn), and a bunch of great people bought us our tractor! Last year, the Mahan family donated a trip to Mexico that raised a lot of support. We always have great guitars, signed by country’s best artists. It will be interesting to see how racing fans like a cowboy-themed event.”

Kujawa also has plans for a trail ride, at Shaker Village outside Lexington

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: AHF volunteer Mallory Mahan with Caleb Gill, who lost his battle with cancer at age 7.

RIGHT: Surelle Chavez, who lost her battle with leukemia at age 7, with AHF Welsh pony, Clovercroft Rocky II.



Johnson from Iron Horse Farms in Georgia. "I am so blessed to say she is starting the second Angel Heart Farm! She is going to do an amazing job. Christine is so talented and has such a big heart that I know AHF-2 will be a huge success.

"One of my goals is an Angel Heart Farm in every state. The need is there. I am not going to say it is easy, but working with these amazing families has given me more than I can ever put into words."

ANGELS NEVER LEAVE

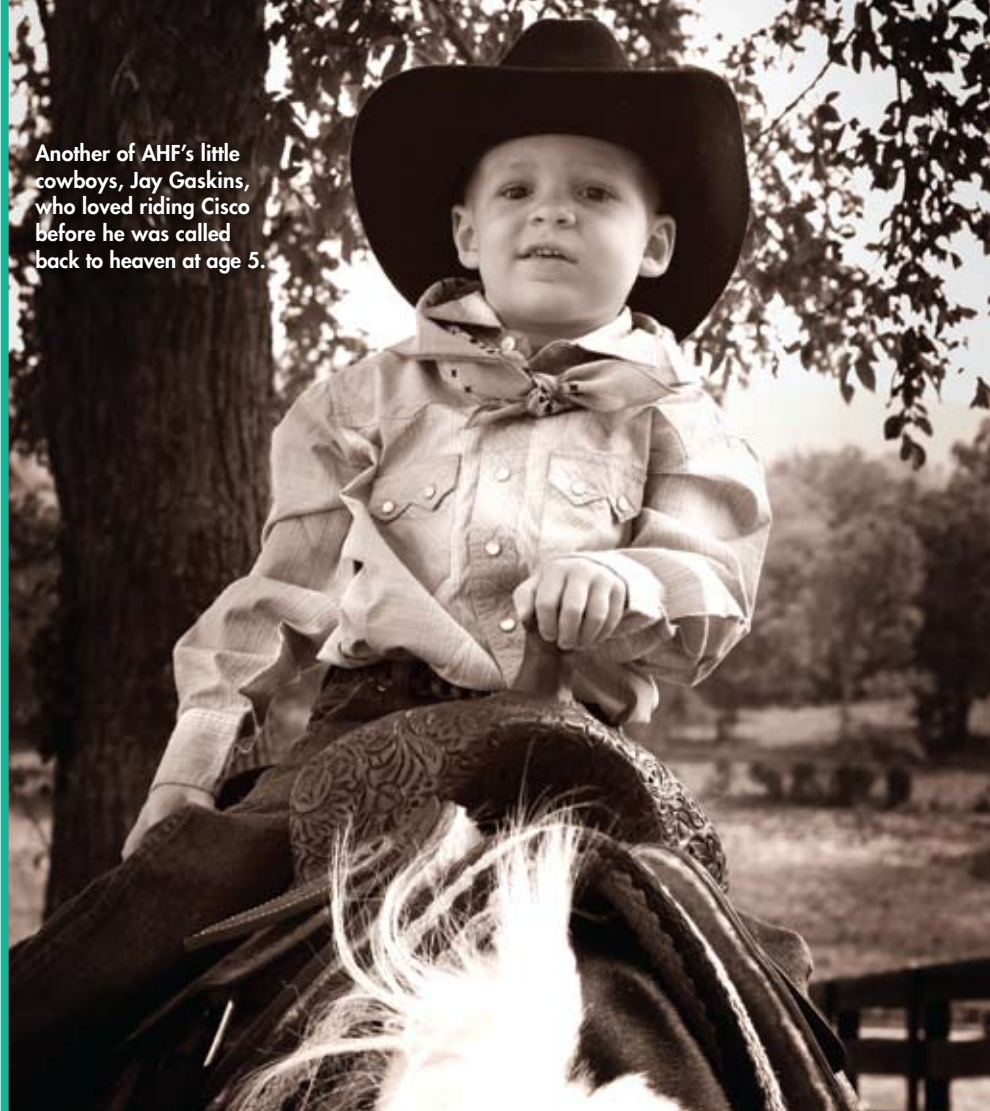
What words cannot express, an Arabian called Rolo Basko +//, a butterfly, and a girl named Amber, might.

A grandson of the immortal *Bask++, the near-white gelding's career included multiple National and Regional wins, including Canadian Reserve National Champion Working Cow Horse, with Bobby Hart, Jr. He was donated to AHF by his 16 year-old owner, Eric Mrosko, who rode with the same show barn as Kujawa.

"Angel Heart Farm chose the Arabian horse as our primary breed for several reasons: their beauty, stamina and pure willingness to please. After years showing my Arabian mare, Khuryia, and battling cancer, I knew the power horses have to heal the body, mind and spirit. So, when trainer Brian Scoggins called and asked me if I would like to have Basko in my program, of course I said, 'Yes!' The Mrosko family felt Basko would have a wonderful life at the farm, and they knew his life's work was yet to come."

They were right.

Eight year-old Amber came to Angel Heart Farm knowing cancer would inevitably claim her short life. On each trip to the farm, she wore a little jacket adorned with butterflies



Another of AHF's little cowboys, Jay Gaskins, who loved riding Cisco before he was called back to heaven at age 5.

and, beneath her bald head, shone big, blue eyes filled with excitement, never despair.

Her dream was riding a white horse. "Amber picked Basko," Kujawa said. "She told me Basko looked like an angel, and when she climbed aboard, what I saw were two angels gracing the paddock."

On Amber's last visit to the farm, too weak to ride, she went to Basko's stall and gently hugged and kissed his soft white neck. She told him they would always be together and she would ride him in heaven.

A week later Amber died.

One afternoon, soon after losing Amber, Kujawa took Basko out for a hack: "A yellow butterfly fluttered nearby throughout our ride."

Over the following weeks, Basko had more butterfly visits and each

time, Kujawa thought of Amber in her butterfly windbreaker. "I told my farrier and vet about each incident, and they said, since Basko's job was to be an angel for special children, now he had an angel to watch over him."

At Angel Heart Farm, perhaps the secrets between an Arabian horse and its rider are so close neither disease, nor death, can tear them apart. 🦋

Since her first byline in the 1970s, L.A. has served the horse industry from FEI to 4-H, and oversaw news and publicity for the USET and 1996 Olympics. The AHP Awards finalist is contributing editor/internet radio show co-host for Holistic Horse Media, media liaison for the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association, and maintains a lively equine social media network on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.