



Meeting Jake and Finding Me

by Kacey Cramer

Dates are great for tracking personal history. On December 23, 2002 I was dying and was flown across the country for intensive treatment in the last of several ineffective attempts to save my life. Fortunately on this day I began a new trend to greet the day with willingness. By some miracle on December 23, I had had enough of barely living inside of a deteriorated body that was battered by me, feeling enslaved to a mind that was truly insane, and walking around with no soul. The nasty, thorny disease of Anorexia Nervosa was fully embedded in me after growing fervidly for 15 years, but on this day I was ready to stop it.

I kept my mouth shut and let the professionals take over. I complied with their complicated plans and did as they asked. I slowly began to stabilize physically, but emotionally I remained shut down until the day I was granted permission to join the equine therapy program. With an arrested condition of dehydration, a shrunken but no longer precarious heart, and an emaciated body slowly accepting nourishment through a feeding tube, I feebly walked to the barn, but with bright eyes.

On January 7, 2003 I met my horse named Jake and my heart took a breath on its own. A massive copper-colored beast with a sparse blond mane and a crooked white stripe running down his face quietly looked at me and gently sighed. Jake carried his own tainted past, which included early physical abuse to his head committed by male ranchers. Typically he spooked around men, women wearing cowboy hats, and strangers immediately going for his forehead. I was forewarned of this possible nervous behavior on the day of our introduction, yet as I stood next to Jake's side and slowly rubbed his neck, he immediately lowered his head down to mine and allowed me to kiss the top of his face. He let me know I felt safe to him even though I was frail and weak.

As I groomed my way around him, I felt drawn to his immense size. He felt solid and grounded which made him feel safe to me. Jake appeared peaceful and content during his rub-down, but as soon as I stopped and turned away, he craned his neck around and watched me return his groom kit to the tack room. The staff saddled up Jake for me and I mounted him with ease. I was delighted to be on horseback as just that morning I met the minimum weight requirement to ride. Early into the trail ride, however, my rump bruised quickly from the rugged saddle and my lack of body cushion. I knew the solution to my discomfort was to eat, but surprisingly I was terrified more by the thought of never seeing Jake again. As we crossed over a desert mountain, I was

able to let Jake lead and I actually relaxed. I realized I had no need to control around him and life felt simpler with Jake. At the end of the session I walked up close to him and he nuzzled me with his head and I hugged his broad neck in return. I left the barn that day convinced that Jake and I shared something, even though I had no idea what that something was.

For half of my life I lived inside of an overly analytical brain that was completely separated from my heart and body. Years of childhood abandonment and rejection by family members and peers resulted in underdeveloped social skills and a resistance to trust others. Within just one week of working with Jake, I discovered the strength to trust him and remarkably he stayed by my side. On January 13, 2003 my treatment team requested additional weekly equine therapy sessions involving Jake to bolster my healing process. I worked on relationship in an exercise where Jake allowed me to fully braid his mane and tail, I practiced assertiveness and persistence with him during an exercise that required him to both trot and canter, and I experienced confidence when we successfully wove through cones for a drill exercise. My spirit, smothered for years by my disease, was awakened by the sensation of Jake's breath through his velvet nostrils on my hand. I remembered the feeling of love every time Jake's large soft eyes offered me a kind look.

The morning of January 22, 2003 marked the day I found my soul again. Recently I began to cry on a regular basis, and at breakfast on this day I felt overwhelmed by both meal portions and other personalities. I was so exhausted from attempting to stuff my feelings and my tears by the end of the meal that I asked to be excused from the first group of the day. A concerned but reluctant staff member agreed, and I rushed up the hill to the barn for permission to see Jake. It was too early for the office to be open, so I walked to the main pen of the horses. As soon as I called Jake's name his ears perked up and he strolled over to my side of the fence. When he greeted me with a nuzzle to my chest my sorrow broke free and I wept. He lowered his neck down to me and I soaked his sweet-scented hair with large tears. I only felt safe expressing these gut-wrenching emotions to Jake because he gave me unconditional love. I isolated from so many people in my life for so long that I was frightened to open up to anyone. Yet if Jake acted like I belonged and didn't discard me after I bared my pain to him, then perhaps the staff and my peers would not judge me either. I left the pen willing to give this new idea a chance.

Emotionally I worked hard with my treatment team, and socially I took risks that resulted in many close friendships. Spiritually I had hope and guidance, and physically my body slowly healed. Jake was a great motivator with my dietary plan as well, for if I ate each course and refused nothing, I was entitled to an extra trail ride every weekend. Many abundant meals were polished off because of my horse! Towards the end of my work with Jake I finally figured out the "something" that he and I shared that first day we met: joy and life.

Epilogue:

On January 11, 2003 a tiny seed was planted inside of my head. I fantasized about giving up my professional career and spending my life working with horses. About 2 weeks later I realized that for a successful recovery from my eating disorder, after I returned home I would have to change all the toxic things rooted in my former life. For ten years I rigorously produced an impressive professional and academic career for all the wrong reasons. My 20-page resume, international research projects, and Ph.D. program offers made me feel just as empty as my Anorexia did. My pure and uncontrived relationship with Jake opened up my heart to bigger plans for my life that

were not only about me. The last day of my 4 months of intensive treatment enlightened me to the fact that Jake was put in my life not just to save me, but to point me in the direction of helping others through horses. Just 9 days later back home in Asheville, N.C. on May 6, 2003, I gave up my scholastic career and began interning for a local equine therapy center.

Biography:

Kacey Cramer has worked in the equine therapy field since 2004, helping children and teens through horses. Currently she is the Director of the TASC program (Therapeutic Animal Stewardship Cooperative) at Eliada Homes, Inc. in Asheville, NC. Kacey volunteers for a growing referral organization in Western North Carolina called T.H.E. Center (Treating, Healing, and Education for Disordered Eating), and speaks about eating disorder awareness at local schools and colleges. On a personal note, Kacey got married in May 2005 on horseback with a special Arabian horse named Masada. In September 2005 Kacey adopted her own horse named Captain, with whom she shared an even stronger bond. Captain was a gentle partner and loyal companion until he lost a valiant battle with bone cancer in April 2009. Captain has inspired Kacey to begin writing a book version of her recovery story and horses. She can be reached at jakeyhorsegirl@yahoo.com.

