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September/October 2017

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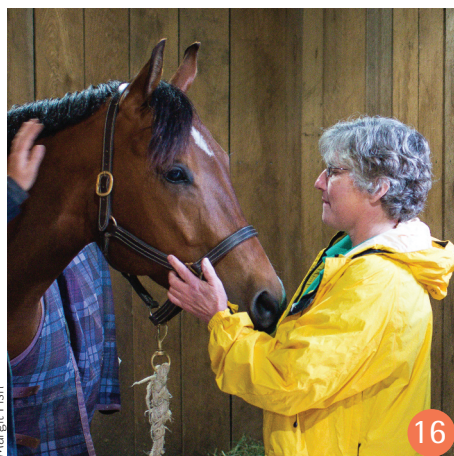


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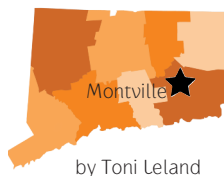
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by Toni Leland

## Farm Feature

# Bit by Bit Stable Bigger Than the Dream

**T**ucked away on a narrow back road in Montville, Bit by Bit Stable is the area's best-kept secret. Barely visible from the road, the farm spreads across 45 acres of green fields and thick woods — a haven for horses. And that's exactly what owner Mary Fischer had in mind.

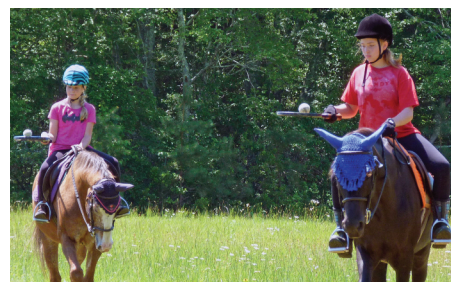
"This farm is set up for the horses," says Mary. "They come first. We have twenty-plus acres in pasture. None of

it. Many hands make light work."

Mary's eight horses have been with her the whole time, and the remaining eight at the farm belong to boarders. "I keep my horses," she says. "I don't get rid of them when they get older. They're happy and healthy, and they have a job to do — and they love that." Some of Mary's horses are in their late twenties and need special care, such as soaking the feed because they have no

which occurs four times during the summer. The riders in the field range in age from 9 to 17, and all are having an equal amount of fun.

Jessica sets up a plank in the center of the field and attaches five blue balloons. The goal of the game is to ride up, lean over, and pop one of the balloons using a long stick with a needle on the end. The horses are completely unconcerned about this, and Mary says.



the horses live in stalls. They all have access to shelter in the small paddocks with run-ins, and they're turned out in a larger herd where they can graze, be social, and just be horses." There's a large barn on the property that's used for hay storage — a full tractor trailer load of hay fits in there which allows the horses to consistently eat the same quality hay all year.

The farm name reflects how Mary built her place. Fifteen or so years ago, she was teaching riding at a small property in Ledyard. Then nine years ago, she moved to the current location and has been growing "bit-by-bit" since then. "I've loved horses since I was little, and I always loved teaching," she says. While in college, Mary volunteered at High Hopes Therapeutic Riding; after graduation, she worked there and went on to get her advanced PATH certification in physical and mental disabilities. She smiles as she talks. "I became a high school special education teacher at Norwich Free Academy, and the school allowed me to work part-time for a few years so I could build up the farm."

This lovely facility has just two staff members: Mary and Jessica Gross, who's been with Mary for 13 years. "We have a lot of volunteers," says Mary, "riders who ride here, and help with farm chores. We don't have to hire a whole bunch of people, and the ones who are here love

### Bit by Bit Stable's Barn Philosophy

- 🐾 Help those that are younger or less experienced.
- 🐾 Take direction and advice from those that are older or more experienced.
- 🐾 Let Mary know if there are any problems or if anything is upsetting you.
- 🐾 Appreciate the time you are able to spend around horses. We are so lucky to have them in our lives.
- 🐾 Only kind words, no talking behind anyone's back.
- 🐾 Always try your best.
- 🐾 Clean up after yourself and your horse.
- 🐾 Have fun. Smile.

teeth. She laughs. "They're in great health. Even the dentist was amazed that they're still alive."

"We use six of the boarders' horses for our lessons, because the program is so consistent that the horses improve with that experience," says Mary. "The boarders are generous and quite happy to let their horses be used."

A burst of laughter from out in the field catches Mary's attention. "Oh, we're starting the games," she says, pointing to a group of riders. They are enrolled in one of Bit by Bit's Summer Horse Experiences, a week-long event

"All the horses are desensitized to scary things, so when they have to be bold in cross country, they're brave. I have horses that jump in and out of water, go through puddles, go to parades, perform in stadiums with thousands of people and loud music. Nothing scares them."

Currently, Bit by Bit has about 50 students and focuses on good horsemanship and good riding. "It's really knowing about the horse, as well as being a good equestrian," says Mary.

The riding programs include basic hunt seat, equitation, hunter, jumping, dressage, vaulting, and eventing, in which both horse and rider need to be versatile, well-trained, and strong in dressage, jumping, and cross country to be successful. One of Bit by Bit's students went to Kentucky for this year's United States Pony Club (USPC) nationals for jumping; another student went for dressage. This is the festival year and students from all over the United States were there. The Bit by Bit students represented the New York-Upper Connecticut Region.

Mary is obviously quite delighted about this. "The level of riders these kids experienced during that time was an opportunity they wouldn't ordinarily have," she says. There were Olympians donating their time for clinics at this event. Many of them rode in Pony Club



and Pony Club's philosophy is that you give back.

What else do the riders at Bit by Bit do with their skills? Hunters, jumpers, and equitation students usually compete on the Connecticut Horse Show Association (CHSA) circuit, going mostly to farms in Connecticut for that, then doing finals at the big CHSA show in late summer. Bit by Bit has an Interscholastic Equestrian Association team that goes to five shows during the winter to try to qualify for the regionals.

Students participate in Connecticut Dressage and Combined Training Association (CDCTA) events and the two-phase series (dressage and stadium jumping) for Tri-State Horsemen's



Toni Leland

Association (TSHA). The Pony Clubbers participate in eventing, dressage, and regionals held in Kent. Other local eventing venues are Ayr Mountain Farm and Mystic Valley Hunt Club.

"We travel en masse," says Mary. "We like being together. For the last horse show, there were fifteen students, eight horses, four trailers, and all our gear. We're supportive of each other. We're competing to be better and better ourselves. We're happy for the people in our barn when they're successful."

To practice cross country, one must have a course, and Bit by Bit has a full course throughout the property, including jumps, obstacles, hills, a pond, and trails in the woods. The cross-country students also train off property at Ayr Mountain Farm where they have water, steps, and ditches to master.

More hilarity echoes from the field as another game gets underway. This time, riders must balance a tennis ball on a racquet while riding around the perimeter. Mary explains that this game teaches balance and learning to keep hands still while riding. Several students are quite skilled at this exercise.

Is the Summer Horse Experience just about games and fun on horseback? Mary shakes her head. "The goal is for it to be the best week of the kids' summer, if not their life," she says. "They have a riding session as well as an

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information session, like taking the bridle apart and cleaning it. Learning all the parts and how to put it back together again. Same with the saddle. And parts of the horse. Lots of general horse knowledge."

There's usually a two to one ratio as far as students to helpers. The kids who are helping have to be at the barn at 8:30 a.m. every morning for a week and they stay until 1:30 p.m. They volunteer because they love it so much, according to Mary. They help to teach the new kids and it makes everything much safer.

These sessions aren't just for kids,

however. The next advanced session has riders from ages 11 to 26 — and includes some adults who are taking off work that week to join the group. Mary says, "I have a girl from France who has come for the past five years; last year she brought her cousin, and this year she's bringing a friend from France."

"This is a neat, welcoming environment," says Mary. "In the advanced session, we'll be doing bareback jumping, a cross-country course, vaulting, and dressage tests. It's a time to grow and experience 'everything horse,' have


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... Bit by Bit Stable  
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friends of all ages, share something in common, and learn from each other."

Bit by Bit has an impressive list of awards and honors for the students who come from all over southeastern Connecticut. These honors are not surprising given Mary's equestrian background. She got her first horse, Curious George, when she was 14 and competed at the Gladstone training center in New Jersey. While at Connecticut College, she was on the intercollegiate riding team and co-captain for two years. And, a true feather in her cap came as a member of the International Equestrian team, with competitions in Belgium and Switzerland in dressage and show jumping. Mary says, grinning, "My parents used to say, 'Oh, it's a stage, she'll grow out of it.' Well, at the age of 47, I think

my parents have realized that I won't!"


She gazes out at the horses ambling around the far field to cool out. Her voice softens. "People say you can't make a living at this, and definitely it's a tough industry for that, but I love it. I don't need to be rich, I just need to be able to pay the bills," she says. "This is beyond what I originally envisioned, even bigger than my dream." 

Toni Leland has written nine equestrian mysteries, a young-adult novel, two books on gardening, and a photographic history, and her articles have appeared in *Grit*, *Over the Back Fence/Ohio*, *Country Living*, *Connecticut Lifestyles*, *Pathfinders*, *Sound and Country*, *Connecticut Family*, and *The Day* (New London). She is the owner of Equine Graphics Publishing Group and SmallHorse Press.

... Addie continued from page 13

squeeze in guitar lessons. Addison is a very busy young lady and I'm thankful she is a straight A student. She volunteers her time at many of the fundraisers we have at the Community Music School in Centerbrook, and she was also part of the Movado Middle School IEA team. (I saw the article in *Connecticut Horse* last month!) She qualified for regionals and zones her first year in IEA. Boy, I'm exhausted just trying to keep up with her schedule."

"She's a wonderful student and one of the truly invested horse kids that I have the privilege of working with," says Addie's trainer Jill. "Addie has been around horses her whole life because of her mom's interest. It's been really interesting to see her develop her own love of the sport and the horses this last year. As her trainer, I

have felt the difference in her going from just tagging along to being the one driving the involvement. Every weekend she can during the school year, and most days during the summer, you can find Addie in the barn helping the staff and taking care of the horses. Addie's involvement and drive are making me believe she will have a long career as a junior, and maybe even professional in the horse industry, and I'm honored to get to see her progress. I'm very excited to see Addie with her new horse Liam as they begin to advance through the levels. Addie's ready to make the next leap in her riding career!" 

Sally L. Feuerberg is the president of the Middlebury Bridle Land Association and a longtime resident of Newtown. Trail riding and continuing her lesson programs are her passions, along with the care of her family, horses, and farm.

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