

Watt's Up In L.A.'s Inner City?

"Horses in the Hood" and Kathy Kusner Change Lives

BY STEPHANIE STEPHENS

The ever-so-imposing Puissance wall was 7'3", but for rider Kathy Kusner, jumping a horse over it was simply another of life's challenges. Kusner, after all, has never shrunk from what most would label "formidable" at best, if not "impossible."

Now, the 15-foot concrete wall that surrounds five industrial acres in Watts—in downtown Los Angeles—represents yet another obstacle, this one financial. For Kusner—a person who modestly dismisses personal accolades—meeting this challenge has implications extending far beyond what she wants, for the goal is to positively impact fragile young lives.

The land within the solid enclosure, although remote in both distance and appearance from traditional lush, green horse pastures, represents fulfillment of an unlikely dream

born in 1992. It's designated as the future home of Kusner's visionary "Horses in the Hood" riding school for at-risk youngsters. Watts, you'll remember, is the site of devastating multi-racially motivated riots that occurred in 1965 and 1992, and is one of the lowest-income African-American communities in the "City of Angels."

Its boundaries are: south, the 105 Freeway; west, the 110; north, 92nd Street; and east, Alameda Avenue. Watts is probably the last place on earth one would expect to find a quality horse facility, but it's absolutely the first place Kusner wants to make one happen.

And Kathy Kusner is not a person who gives up.

Smile: You're at Camp!

Kusner needn't prove anything to anyone, least of all herself. Her equestrian curriculum vitae is one of the most impressive, listing her as AHSA Horsewoman of the Year, a member of the Show Jumping Hall of Fame, veteran of three Olympics and two Pan American



Courtesy Kaiser Permanente Watts Counseling and Learning Center



Katey Barreil

Games and winner of numerous major European grand prix. She was named one of the "Most Influential Horse People of the 20th Century" by *The Chronicle of the Horse*.

After waging a successful legal battle, Kusner became the first licensed female racing jockey. She also became the first female to ride in a steeplechase at the race track since World War II. She's a licensed pilot who's acquired a diversity of type ratings, and she possesses aerobatics skills. Forced to be financially resourceful, Kusner honed her in-air capabilities via the barter system, trading horse work for flight training that saw her become a commercial pilot for prestigious Executive Jet Aviation flying Lear jets.

She's an experienced scuba diver and a highly competitive long-distance runner, having run 91 marathons and 57 ultramarathons (longer than the 26.2-mile variety). Although riding is in her past, she gives clinics and serves as an expert equine/ equestrian witness.

And she works tirelessly to nurture Horses in the Hood (HHLA).

"We'd like to have a permanent stable in Watts," explains Kusner optimistically, used to the dropped-jaw reaction of those who hear that. The site she's chosen is conveniently located between the four housing projects in Watts. It's cost? Up front—\$3 million, and experts estimate another \$11 million is needed to endow the riding school. It calls for a lofty level of fund-raising that "Horses in the Hood" has not even begun to experience, but from which Kusner and her board of directors do not shirk.

In the meantime, no stable in Watts? So, take the Watts kids to a stable.

"Money raised thus far—practically 100 percent of donations, excluding a small allocation for newsletters, stamps, etc.—has been used to send children to horse day camp, now in Topanga, CA, for five-day stretches," explains Kusner. Kids attend from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., ride twice daily in lessons, and are taught to

groom and tack up. A visiting farrier and veterinarian share knowledge, too.

Maybe not so special to those of us who ride regularly, but camp is an almost unimaginable concept to the wide-eyed,

**Above: "Horses in the Hood" day camps allow and encourage children from Watts to bond with horses.
Inset: Kathy Kusner, one of the "Most Influential Horse People of the 20th Century."**

grateful participants, who soak up every marvelous minute like sponges in water. To date, 531 youngsters, ages six through high school, have attended 22 day camps.

The program provides the opportunity to experience life without dodging bullets.

Children receive a disposable camera—many have never taken a picture before—and a book entitled, *Happy Horsemanship*, by Dorothy Henderson Pinch, and a pizza party on the last day of camp for their family and friends. And they receive something that's frequently indescribable, known only to them, in the depths of their souls: confidence and self-esteem.

Pat Hill is family advocate and parent educator for the government-funded Healthy Start program at Florence Griffith Joyner Elementary School. Those in her care have lost parents to violence or to incarceration; they're basically foster-care kids, and "Horses in the Hood" has bequeathed a perspective far removed from daily gangland existences.

"This is thoroughly rewarding for them; it's broadened their horizons, given them something to look forward to, with a new perspective," avows Hill.

Ralph Flores works for L.A. Bridges of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee:

"When they leave this environment, these at-risk kids open up, build trust, accept responsibility...for an animal for a week. They smile and laugh. They don't have to look over their shoulder to see if they're about to be mugged, shot or stabbed. Sometimes, they don't even know how to act, they're so quiet."

And conversely, reports Flores, these "tough" kids who think they run their neighborhoods will sometimes scamper in fear when wind rustles a bush at camp, a sight and sound

uncommon to the concrete jungles that is their "home."

Segregation Frustration

Kusner knows how easily a child can be affected by the world around him or her. She grew up in Virginia in the bleak time of racial segregation, a period etched indelibly into her memory...into her entire being. Her treasured African-American friends were horse grooms, not allowed to enter "white"-designated schools, restrooms or restaurants, and much less, horse shows. The already-accomplished rider traveled to horse shows with the grooms in a van. At lunchtime she would take their orders, and go inside the segregated diner to get everybody's food. "The van's ramp would be put down, and we would sit on it and eat lunch," she recalls.

"I always felt so sad that this was a fact of life at that time," recounts Kusner despondently. Her recollection of a "colored" horse show in Vista, MD, in the 1950s is keen, since she was the only white rider competing.

"When we lined up in the middle of the ring for an under-saddle class, the judges and steward walked over and welcomed me. They were so gracious and so kind, and everyone was so much fun." Then, she silently

hoped to someday give something back. And she has...with help, but more is required.

"We hope we continue to receive enough contributions to never have to say 'No' to a request to go to horse camp from any of the Watts programs for children at risk," says Kusner, who figures it costs just under \$4,000 to send 12 children to camp for a week. "If 'Horses in the Hood' can never provide anything else, making horse camp a reality is worth its weight in gold."

Below: Camp kids, adult volunteers, Kathy Kusner, and jockey Julie Krone (far left) enjoyed "Horses in the Hood Day" at Santa Anita Park in California.



Courtesy Santa Anita Park

The cost vs. results: priceless, from any observer's point of view.

Just ask Oscar Neal, who, at 67, owns Watts-based, Southern-style Jordan's Restaurant, in his family since 1942. Kusner and fellow HHLA board members sometimes meet at Oscar's over soul food.

"In this environment, kids are not exposed to many things, like owning a dog or cat, so consequently they are excluded and detached from emotions such as unconditional love. They think, 'Love is something we only see on television,'" he says.

In Watts, it's twice as tough, explains Neal. "It's something to be really macho here, not to cry or show feelings. But that in turn lays the framework for an individual to become abusive."

Like those others who know and love Kusner, he says, "She's a champion in every way. We're so fortunate to have her come through our lives."

Kusner is reflective about the challenges of making "Horses in the Hood" a Watts fixture, but she's in no way pessimistic. The stable needs different funding from the camps. Rome wasn't built in a day and a "Horses in the Hood" stable obviously won't be either.

The children's "thank-you's" are all that's needed to keep Kathy Kusner and her board of directors "in the zone." For in the hood, there's hope now: a four-hoofed animal that sounds its approval to the once-timid child who lovingly brushes the hairs on its neck...and looks forward to doing it again tomorrow. ■

Stephanie Stephens, of Laguna Niguel, CA, is a print and broadcast journalist, published in major equine and general consumer magazines. She syndicates a national radio show, Animal Magnetism, about pets and wildlife. She rides Al Capone, her 18hh Holsteiner jumper.

Help Put Horses in the Hood:

Send your donations to Horses in the Hood, 804 18th St, Santa Monica, CA 90403 or call "Horses in the Hood" at (323) 564-7669. Visit the organization's web site at www.hhla.org.

Almost 100 percent of contributions received are used to send children to horse camp.

Jana Gustman, who runs the HHLA office, is the only paid staffer, says Kusner. Gustman's part-time salary is paid by "a gift from a wonderful family who made this donation anonymously."