



A NATURAL
HORSEWOMAN
PURSUES HER CALLING
AS TEACHER, MENTOR
AND TRAINER,
CHANGING LIVES ONE
COLT AT A TIME.

AMERICAN COWGIRL

By Chase Reynolds Ewald ~ Photography by Audrey Hall

STAY
TALK
WITH
THE
COWGIRL

In April of 2013, a Montana State University newspaper ran an article addressing an unusual situation, contested by some, in which a student had applied for a teaching job at the university. Reata Brannaman, if hired, would be teaching her peers in a year-long, for-credit class while still attending the university as a full-time undergraduate herself. In the article, Brannaman acknowledged that the situation could be viewed as problematic, but said she wasn't too concerned about what people thought; at the time, she pointed out, she'd already been teaching for years. In the article, Glen Duff, head of the Department of Animal and Range Sciences at MSU, was equally matter-of-fact. "A qualified person is a qualified person," he said.

A few months later, Reata Brannaman became the youngest instructor in the history of the university. In fact, when she started teaching in the fall of her sophomore year, she was the youngest person in her own class. But for those who say age is a state of mind, Reata

Brannaman is living proof of that adage. Now 23 and a graduate (she matriculated from MSU this past winter with a B.S. in Business), she is not only the instructor of MSU's Equine Program's colt-starting class, she has dramatically raised the profile of the program, as well as the Top of the West Horse Sale, at which students' colts are auctioned off to raise funds for the program, raising approximately \$150,000 annually.

The recent graduate divides her time between her job in Bozeman, her work at the family place in Sheridan and the open road, traveling to clinics, roping events, and brandings. Despite the demands of teaching—sometimes 50–60 hours a week during the school year—her busiest time may actually be summer. During those months she is locating colts for the class (she gets about 20 colts donated, often from professional trainers); managing and training her own remuda, including several new foals a year; marketing the family's three studs; assisting in her father's clinics; and running an internship program: This year there are four students living with the Brannaman family in Sheridan learning every aspect of the horse business. Additionally, she manages and markets horses

BELOW: Reata on the range working cattle. Photo by Skye Clark. OPPOSITE PAGE: Reata at a training clinic. Photo by Audrey Hall.





for a client in Bozeman while also keeping busy with the logistics and planning for the Brannaman Pro-Am Vaquero Roping, held every October in Santa Ynez, California. The event is an inspiration of her father's, modeled after Pro-Am golf tournaments in which amateurs are paired with professionals. Over the past five years she has helped grow the roping to a popular four-day event. It attracts 150 teams and several thousand spectators, brings together 20 vendors of Western gear, and hosts the Fusion Show, a craftsmen's collective curated and run by Reata's closest childhood friend, silversmith Nevada Watt.

This is a lot of hats for any one person to wear, let alone someone who is barely out of school. But Reata Brannaman has always been older than her years. Born into a dynamic family in which

everyone worked together, and trailing her next oldest sister by ten years, she was expected to keep up and she did. Growing up traveling long distances to clinics in the summer months throughout her childhood, Reata learned from a young age to be helpful, to

observe, to cultivate patience, and to relate to people of all ages.

Carrie Ballantyne, a family friend and renowned portraitist who painted Reata at age 12, recalls, "As a child she was very observant and mindful. She knew what she liked and didn't like. She had very strong

parents who had high standards and she was around adults a lot growing up. She has her father's teaching skills; she has a real natural way of sharing her knowledge without making you feel you're asking stupid questions."

"It's neat to put together how I grew up in Sheridan and the teachings of my father, Ray Hunt and Tom Dorrance, and how it's not just about the horses and it's not just about the horse starting. It's about how you treat people and animals in everyday life."

Reata's participation in every aspect of the family business meant that she never felt limited by her youth. She did the things other kids do: She worked at her academics, she played basketball and danced ballet, she did 4-H—all while doing ranch chores, working with animals and helping out around the ranch. Like many ranch kids she learned specialized skills young: driving a pickup, hauling a trailer, moving cows, fixing fence, undertaking minor vet work. But she also learned the rarified skills of natural horsemanship in the style personified by three gifted men: Ray Hunt, Tom Dorrance and her father, Buck Brannaman. Born into the tradition, she learned it by osmosis, observing her father's colt-starting clinics from her earliest years. By the time she was a teen, she was helping instruct; she even had her own clients. This early exposure combined with an inherent wisdom, maturity, keen observation skills, and a natural gift for communicating—with people and animals—make Reata Brannaman a trainer of note in her own right. Add to that an entrepreneurial bent, excellent organizational skills and a love of hard work and the result is a remarkably accomplished and dynamic young woman. She's humble too. When asked about her incredible array of projects, she says only, "I'm just really good at having a lot of irons in the fire."

As a girl, Reata always knew where her passions lay. She, of course, started riding young. Her first pony was given to her by Olympic gold medalist Melanie Smith Taylor; her mother recalls her roping her first longhorn calf at age 7. When at age 16 she was given a choice between a car and a saddle, she chose the saddle (a Harwood, still her most prized possession). Reata also melded her love of people, design

OPPOSITE PAGE: Reata and her father, Buck, Brannaman. Photo by Allen Russell. RIGHT: Reata in braids. Photo by Skye Clark.





and ranch gear with a natural entrepreneurial flair at an early age. She started out by assisting her mother, Mary Brannaman, in selling ranch gear at the clinics. Soon she was custom-shaping the SunBody hats they sold, as well as designing her own silk scarves. By the age of 12, she had established Reata Ranchwear. SunBody sells a line of hats under her name; to this day, the Reata is their most popular design.

For Reata, it all comes back to family and, of course, horses. Her father imbued her with his lifetime knowledge of animals; her mother helped her translate her entrepreneurial ambitions into reality from the youngest age. There was no “can’t.” But they also made sure she got to be a regular kid. “It would have been so much easier for my parents to homeschool me,” Reata notes, “but I’m so happy they sent me to school.” For her part, Mary Brannaman credits Reata’s teachers; they taught her, inspired her and believed in her, which afforded invaluable life lessons and experiences beyond what she learned at home. “In the public school system they did an amazing job in helping her along and keeping her excited about things,” she says. “It’s really important because your teachers can make you or break you.”

Clearly having positive role models in and out of the classroom is one reason Reata has been so successful at teaching, despite her young age. For her part she is just grateful for the opportunity to share the wisdom that’s been handed down, and to make a difference in the lives of budding horse trainers—and of the animals, one colt at a time.

In a 2015 radio interview with Lane Nordlund she said, “It’s neat to put together how I grew up in Sheridan and the teachings of my father, Ray Hunt, and Tom Dorrance, and how it’s not just about the horses and it’s not just about the horse starting. It’s about how you treat people and animals in everyday life. It’s about developing a relationship and learning how to communicate in a way that works for everyone. The best part of the class,” she added, “is seeing how [students] change in every other aspect of their lives.”

Reata Brannaman has found a way to synthesize the best of tradition while embracing new methods: For instance, she markets and networks—selling horses and promoting branding and auctions—through social media apps such as Facebook and Instagram, where she has more than 16,000 followers. She has found a way to carve out her own identity while still working within the embrace of a strong family. In doing so successfully, she represents the best of the New West, personifying a fresh vision of what it means to be a cowgirl. **CG**



TOP TO BOTTOM: Reata at work designing; at MSU, with best friends (l to r) Nevada Watt, Reata, Hannah Ballantyne, Cely Rae Highberger. Photos by Audrey Hall. OPPOSITE PAGE: Reata at work roping. Photo by Skye Clark.