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Farm Feature

Fox Crossing Equestrian

A Winning Combination of Horses and Kids

by Andrea Bugbee

In 2008, Litchfield resident Cindy Italiaander bought a farm and ever since then, she's been building an equestrian family.

Initially, Cindy had been searching for a child-friendly stable where she could share her newfound love of riding with her spanky, eight-year-old twins, Eli and Max. But, Cindy says, "I really couldn't find anything at that time in Litchfield County."

purchased the property, naming it Fox Crossing Equestrian. Cindy has been nurturing the business ever since.

They covered the asphalt alleyways with rubber pavers. They fixed the fences; shored up the stalls; added wash stalls with heating lamps; groomed the indoor and outdoor riding rings; added an outdoor regulation size dressage arena, and eventually grew big enough to hire two trainers, two grooms, two stall

In the winter, Fox Crossing's middle- and high-school Interscholastic Equestrian Association (IEA) teams take over (Cindy's son, Max, is a member), and opportunities for riders to explore hunt seat, jumpers, or dressage fill the schedule year round.

When a child has her very first riding lesson, Cindy's goals are straightforward. "I hope that they feel comfortable with their trainer," she says. "I hope that



Student and boarder Alice Maggin and Jasper.



Students having fun at Connecticut Horse Shows Association Finals.

Of course, Cindy didn't mean there were no stables in Litchfield County. This crown of Connecticut has endless acres of bucolic horse properties, proudly displaying white fences and manicured fields. These facilities are perfect for what they are — competitive show barns, or adult barns where children are certainly welcome, but, just as certainly, not the focus.

Cindy's search eventually led her to a facility on South Street in Morris that also happened to be for sale. Perched on 25 acres at the peak of a modest hill, the stable was solidly equipped with an 80' x 200' indoor arena, 30 stalls, and ample turnout space to keep horses healthy and happy. Although she had only been riding for a few years herself, Cindy knew the opportunity was too good to ignore.

She had identified Litchfield County's untapped piece of the equestrian market, and her double passion for horses and kids was ideal for filling the gap. She and her husband, Michael,

cleaners, and four part-time helpers.

Today, Fox Crossing Equestrian offers boarding, leasing, training, and instruction at all levels. It's the happy home base for 18 school horses, 25 boarded horses, two portly barn cats, an on-site trainer, and innumerable children and adults who spend as much of their leisure time there as they possibly can.

Your Lifelong Hobby Starts Here

Cindy wants her farm to welcome children into the irresistible world of riding and showing, so she has initiated programs with Washington Montessori School, the Taft School, and Rumsey Hall, all nearby independent schools that now have afterschool horseback riding programs at Fox Crossing Equestrian.

In the summers, 120 kids participate in Fox Crossing's summer camp, and the facility hosts the riding program for Washington's Camp Chinqueba.

they feel safe, and that they enjoy their first time and want to come back. That's the most important thing. I just want them to leave really, really happy."

Have It Your Way

Surprisingly, this winning combination of horses and kids had an exponent Cindy hadn't foreseen.

According to business lore, one of the ways that McDonald's became the nation's largest fast-food franchise was by catering to children, whose parents then just came along. Although that model wasn't Cindy's intention, it is, in essence, exactly what began to happen at Fox Crossing. The children were having so much fun that many of their parents also started (or, more accurately, restarted) to ride.

Take Alex Alcott of New York City and Roxbury, for example. "I was sitting there watching my daughter and I thought, 'I should be riding, too,'" Alex says. "The next thing I know, I'm buying a horse and starting to show. It's

kind of a nice mother/daughter thing we can do together."

This story isn't at all unusual at Fox Crossing. Alex had brought her daughter, Emma, for riding lessons because Alex, herself, had loved to ride as a child. When Emma's love for the sport took off, Alex found herself eager to take lessons again as an adult. "It's kind of like riding a bike," Alex says. "Even if you haven't done it in a while, it comes right back to you."

"We have a lot of mother/daughter teams," Cindy says, smiling, her blue eyes delighted. "We get a lot of moms back riding again."

Alice Maggin is another example. A former Westchester junior rider, Alice was looking for the perfect way to lure her daughter, Lila Nelson, from their home on Manhattan to the Connecticut countryside, which Alice loves. "I thought, 'What little girl doesn't want to ride?'" says Alice. She artfully signed Lila up for the Fox Crossing lesson program.

"That's definitely what got me to come and stay — my daughter," Alice says. When the barn manager suggested that Alice take some lessons herself, this mom was all in. Like Alex, Alice now owns her own horse (a German Warmblood named Jasper), and spends three days a week in Connecticut, mostly for the pure joy of riding.

"We both show. We love it," Alice says. "And I would say that Lila has better friends here than she does at school because of the shared interests [at Fox Crossing]. We all socialize together happily; that's kids and adults. It's not a fancy show barn with a lot of wealthy people. It's really very family-oriented. Cindy has a Halloween party every year. She has a magician come and there's a potluck dinner. Then she has a Christmas party. It's very social. My closest friends since we moved up here are from the barn."

Even the parents who don't ride feel as though they are a vital part of the Fox Crossing family. "Sometimes it's the kids that are the only ones who participate, but here the entire family participates. We feel like we're part of the barn even if we never get on a horse," says Kristi Plaskonos, who moved to Northwest Connecticut in July and registered her children, 11-year-old Blanche and 8-year-old Henri, for lessons. Blanche now rides at Fox Crossing twice a week. She competes on the middle school IEA team, and she assists Cindy by hacking energetic ponies, tidy-

ing the aisles, and helping less experienced riders saddle up.

A Priceless Experience

"All the girls here are so lovely," says Kristi. "They all have this camaraderie, and there is so much to do at the barn because of the lack of technology — lots of barn chores, older kids helping younger or less-experienced riders, a greater sense of responsibility, a deeper connection to the barn and the barn family," Kristi says, pointing out the hidden benefits of barn time. "It's a priceless experience."

According to Kristi, many of the older girls Blanche has met through Fox Crossing "grew up at the barn." Kelly Susi's daughter, Bella, is one of them.

"Sometimes it's the kids that are the only ones who participate, but here the entire family participates . . .

"My daughter is 18 years old," says Kelly, an enthusiastic barn mom. "She's been riding at Fox Crossing since she was about [9], and we've never had the desire for her to ride anywhere else. My daughter has made lifelong friends here. It's a wonderful facility and a wonderful place to be. Cindy is an amazing business person. She runs the facility as a business, but she also runs the barn as if it's a family. No one there ever feels excluded. Cindy's very kind. She knows that not everyone is in the same situation, and no matter what kind of rider you are, she has a program for you."

Full Days Build a Full Barn

With blonde hair, sky blue eyes, and a petite frame flattered by a comely work uniform of britches and boots, Cindy's greatest strength seems to be her stamina. "I've never seen a woman work so hard," says Kelly.

Generally, Cindy is at the stable seven days a week. "I love it," she says. "There's something great about being the person everyone has to come to, because then I can take care of things as they arise. I love watching the kids smile, and I love to ride. I do put my heart and soul into [Fox Crossing] because these horses count on us and they can't talk. Also, people are always

willing to help out because they see how hard I work. They know I care, so they care, too."

Cindy's trainer, Catherine Maher, works just as hard. With an apartment directly over the stables, Catherine is on site for emergencies, and her days are literally packed with lessons and training rides. Young and energetic, this UConn graduate remains as flexible as Cindy's programs so that she can help a range of riders — and horses — succeed at every level. It was Catherine, in fact, who went out of her way to find the right partner for Alex in an eight-year-old Thoroughbred gelding named Justin.

"Catherine's really been a mentor to me, and I don't know how I'd do what I do without her," Alex says. "She's the one helping me grow and learn and, at the same time, she's helping my horse grow and learn, too." When Alex hit a rough patch with Justin (he had become uncharacteristically cranky), Catherine and Cindy stood back and gave the whole picture an educated think. "It was, 'Let's look at all the things we are doing for him.' Their overall goal was, 'What's best for Justin? What's going to help him do the best at his job?'"

After having a vet come out, then examining the gelding's diet and treating him with chiropractic and massage, "All the things we've worked on have been paying off," Alex says, gratefully. "For me, Fox Crossing is a special place. It's the care that goes into every rider, and the horses there, and the atmosphere Cindy has created to make it a very nurturing, warm, fun place to be as a rider."

Cindy strives to cultivate a reputation for being inclusive. "People choose our farm because they are so comfortable here," she says. "That's really what we're all about. Everyone is welcome through our doors, and everyone is part of our farm."

Speaking for both herself and her daughter, Alice agrees. "We love it here, obviously," she says. "For us, Fox Crossing isn't a stepping stone. It's where we plan to be."

Andrea Bugbee is a Pony Club mom, an IEA mom, and a backyard horse enthusiast. She does most of her writing while she waits for her daughter in the parking lots of numerous wonderful stables scattered throughout western Massachusetts and northern Connecticut.