

Equine Guelph Online Student Monica Laane-Fralick – graduation speech 2019



I would like to thank the University for inviting me to speak today and share my learning journey with you. It truly is an honour to be asked.

Secondly, I would like to congratulate all the students here that are graduating. We have all worked long and hard to get to this point, and to be gathered here today is indeed a celebration of our accomplishments. This is OUR day.

My introduction to Equine Guelph was quite by accident, and what began as a mild curiosity evolved into an incredible learning experience.

Many years ago, a young lady named Stephanie came into our lives. I met her through work and learned that many of the home and family issues she was having were the same ones I endured growing up.

I was fortunate to have some wonderful people help me through some difficult times, and this was my chance to help make a difference in someone else's life. She moved into our home for a short time, so that she could find her own identity and path in life.

After Stephanie left, we told her, "Anything you need, anything you want, any time, you let us know".

"I want a horse" she said.

Over the years, this continued, so many conversations would include me asking her, "Do you need anything?" and her replying, "No, but I still want a horse."

About 6 years ago, my husband Chris and I were discussing moving and getting a property with some acreage. We also discussed getting a few horses, not just for Stephanie, but for us for pleasure.

Our only experience with horses was a terrifying and horrific trail ride we had done a few years prior. I had never been exposed to horses, I knew nothing, nor did Chris. So, we decided it might be wise to learn something about them beforehand.

I got a book – a beginner's guide to owning and caring for horses, just to get an idea.

Well, that was it. I was hooked.

I searched to see if there was any courses I could take to learn more about these amazing animals and stumbled across Equine Guelph. Chris and I talked, and we decided that I would "try one course, to see how I liked it." It was perfect, online learning, I could do it in my spare time.

17 courses, 1 diploma, and 2 certificates later, here I am. And I am not done learning.

When I began my studies, I found a local boarding facility to volunteer at. This was by far one of the most valuable learning experiences of my education.

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I learned about handling, feeding, grooming, behaviours, farm safety, winter and summer survival, everything a horse needs for day-to-day care, plus more. I attended clinics, horse shows, helped at competitive events - I was combining practical knowledge with what I was learning in school.

I also learned that if horses do not wish to come near you, they can teleport themselves across several acres to the opposite end of the paddock. Poof! 1000 pounds gone in a second, just a blip on the horizon.

Sadly, I also learned what not to do. I witnessed many dangerous situations, and saw many decisions made that were not in the best interests of the horse's welfare.

Throughout my courses, I found that this was not the exception. I discovered that many people who handled and cared for horses were not educated in their care and needs. As boarders, many are at the mercy of the owners and caregivers, and we all assume that because they have the business, they have the knowledge to do right by our animals. Sadly, this is not always the case.

Chris and I talked, and we decided that we could do this. We could open a boarding facility and do it right. And make all kinds of money. 😊

So, I plunged into the Business Management courses. What an eye opener!

I met Chris Pohlkamp last year, (the instructor for the course) and she asked me what I had been doing since taking the Business Management Course. I jokingly told her that I had planned on opening a boarding facility but changed my mind after taking her course. While this comment may seem to be unflattering, it is actually the opposite.

This course was so thorough in teaching me to analyze both the financial and human costs of running a successful boarding facility. I wish more people would do this before jumping into such a venture.

One day, I may still wish to have a small operation. I have the tools and the knowledge with a solid business plan – I know what I am in for.

My studies continued and I began to complete the requirements for the Equine Welfare Certificate.

Last year, while taking the Equine Welfare course, my learning journey took yet another turn. Having completed so many courses, I was stumped for a topic for my major assignment, so I reached out to my instructor, Gayle Ecker, to ask for advice.

I told her I felt that I had “been there done that” with many of the topics I was looking at, and I wanted something that “I could really sink my teeth into.”

She posed this question to me: “Is it generally human behaviour and human decisions that impact on the negative welfare of horses? By the same token, is it human behaviour and human decisions that can impact on the positive welfare of horses?”

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And so began the next part of my education – into Human Behaviour Change for Animal Welfare, an emerging science which can be the key to helping us understand why we make the decisions that we do when it comes to our horses by studying our own behaviours.

Science has provided us with most of the answers to avoid neglect, suffering and abuse. Yet, many who interact with animals still do not follow sound practices to improve animal welfare or they follow the advice of others whose approaches can have negative impacts.

As humans, we have the knowledge, motivation and understanding to make changes to our behaviours, but we need to study ourselves and change our habits and views first.

When I started all of this, I had no real idea where I was going or what I was going to do with all this knowledge. Now, moving forward, I feel the best contribution I can make to the equine industry is to share what I have learned and what I will continue to learn.

My desire is to not so much physically work with horses but contribute to the education and research side of the industry.

Having just completed my Editing Certificate through Simon Fraser University, I am starting a career in equine journalism and editing.

My focus for my writings will be on improving equine welfare across the globe, whether it be through genetic research which can help detect genetic diseases, to human behaviour change, to simply educating people on proper horse care and making better decisions for their horses.

I am also looking into becoming a peer helper or teaching assistant for one of the Equine Guelph courses.

Our instructors challenged us to look deeper for answers, to look for reliable sources, to not take information at face value, but prove its validity. I intend to do this in everything I do, and I would like the opportunity to help students as my instructors and peer helpers did for me.

Another student and I recently met up at the International Society for Equitation Science Conference held here in August. We are going to do a research project together and hope to be able to present this ourselves at the conference in the near future.

Beyond that, I am looking into pursuing my Masters in Equine Science. (I do not even have to look at my husband right now to know he is rolling his eyes, but I also know he will support me in my decision, just as he has done in the past.)

In the world of horses, we cannot stop learning – to do so would be a great disservice to the animals we have invited into our world. New research will emerge. We will continue to find new ways and better methods of improving equine welfare across the globe.

However, I chose to get the messages out, whether it be at a horse event, a clinic, through teaching, through casual conversations at a facility, helping at EquiMania! or through an article I will write, I know that I must be part of the change. I believe that all of us that have completed the equine studies have a responsibility to make our world a better place for the horse.

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My path has evolved since I started with Equine Guelph in 2014, and the road in my future will have many more twists and turns, but I am excited about what might be revealed around each corner. I look forward to the challenges.

And it all started because a young lady said, “I want a horse.”

In closing, I would like to once again congratulate all of you on your accomplishments and wish you every success as you start the next chapter in your lives.

Thank you for your time, enjoy the celebrations!

Monica Laane-Fralick