

Donaldson saddles up as equine ambassador

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Monday, July 13, 2015 9:20 am

JEFFERSON — Destiny Donaldson has been riding horses essentially since she was born, having been placed on the backs of her grandfather Jim Trawicki's Belgians when she was just a baby.

She began riding horses in earnest at the age of 5 and has been doing so ever since, saying that she rides every day and that time with her horse comes before homework.

Now 16, she took on a new role Saturday night when she was crowned the 2015 Jefferson County Equine Ambassador during the Jefferson County Fair.

Donaldson was one of two candidates for the equine ambassador crown, along with her best friend and fellow Stable Stompers member Cameron Klein.

"It was a friendly competition," Donaldson said. "We helped each other a lot during the year."

Donaldson, the daughter of Michele Trawicki and Mark Donaldson, has a 15-year-old sister, Kayla, who also is involved in the Horse and Pony project.

As the county Equine Ambassador, Donaldson's role will involve promoting the educational side of 4-H, and helping to increase the visibility of the Horse and Pony Project.

"Our project has been shrinking and we want to get more younger youth involved," Donaldson said. "We'd love to see young 4-H members give it a try. It's fun; it's not cliquey. You learn a lot and it's very rewarding. And not everyone is aware that we have a 'horseless horse' project available for people who don't have horses of their own."

The equine ambassador also provides encouragement and support to older and younger youth, and takes a leadership role with the Horse and Pony Project on a county level, something Donaldson has been doing all along.

Donaldson, who's entering her junior year at Jefferson High School this fall, said a love of horses runs in her family. Her grandpa owned horses and her mom did barrel racing when she was younger.



EQUINE REP NAMED

EQUINE REP NAMED — Destiny Donaldson of Helenville was named the Jefferson County Equine Ambassador Saturday night during the 2015 Jefferson County Fair. She has been riding since she was born, having been placed on her grandfather Jim Trawicki's Belgians when she was a baby. She rides every day and her horse comes before homework. Shown above is Donaldson with her horse. For more fair photos, click here. — Daily Union photo by Pam Chickering Wilson.

"I've been riding regularly since I was 5 years old," Donaldson said. "I used to ride my mom's trail horse, Storm, and I began showing him in the third grade.

"Then in the fifth-grade, I switched to a paint mare named Cherokee," she said.

Cherokee had a challenging personality and bucked Donaldson off more than once.

"I had to work very hard to train her and bring her into line, turning her from a speed horse into a pleasure horse," Donaldson said. "With time and patience, we got it done, but she gave me a lot of trouble along the way. She gave me a hematoma by stepping on me after bucking me off, and for that reason I can no longer fit in English boots."

Cherokee had a baby named "Bella" which Donaldson trained herself until the day she sold Bella as a 6-year-old.

Donaldson's current horse, officially named "Be Good Twice" and called "Goodie" for short, still is quite young.

"I bought her as a 2-year-old and broke her out last year," Donaldson said. "This is my first year ever showing her. She's very sweet and extremely cuddly, and it's pretty simple to guide her, but you have to have a gentle hand. You can't be too stern, because she takes it personally."

Originally a member of the Helenville Hustlers 4-H Club, Donaldson eventually switched to the horse-centered Stable Stompers.

In the past, she also has competed in cake decorating, veterinary science and card-making as well as showing her dog. However, with her dog suffering an illness and the large time commitment the equine ambassador process required, at this year's fair she just concentrated on her horse.

Donaldson said she also has participated in Jefferson High School's equestrian club in the past, though not last year, and she remains involved in her school's FFA organization.

When she was old enough, she began working with horses. Her job involves doing grooming, riding, cleaning stalls, feeding and watering horses, and all manner of chores at Acclaim Performance Horses.

"I just love riding," Donaldson said. "I like the bond I've built with my horse, and I like meeting everyone involved in the Horse and Pony Project. Showing at fair is always a blast."

She has done a little of everything, including Western Pleasure, Western Horsemanship, Western Showmanship and English Showmanship, but said her favorite class is Western Pleasure.

Donaldson typically takes part in open horse shows one or two times a month. She also has qualified for state fair before.

The Equine Ambassador competition has taken up the better part of the last year. It's not a single event, but rather an intensive, multi-part competition that officially is kicked off in March.

The process begins with a written application covering the candidates' backgrounds with horses and why they want to try for the equine ambassador position. Later, any candidate for the honor must give a speech, demonstrate their judging abilities, execute a showmanship pattern, complete an exam to demonstrate their horse knowledge and undergo an interview process.

“Volunteerism counts as well,” Donaldson said. “We’re expected to take a leadership role in the Horse and Pony Project Committee, and to serve as mentors for younger students who are coming up through the project.”

In addition, equine ambassador candidates had to take part in the spring workshop held in the county earlier this year, in which the candidates worked with youth in the project, teaching them how to dress for a show and what tack is used during a show.

Donaldson serves as reporter for the committee, and she has done her part in assisting younger riders, just as the older riders helped show her the ropes when she started.

“The hardest part of the process for me was the test — it was really challenging,” Donaldson said.

Saturday marked the final portion of the competition.

The new equine ambassador said that serving as equine ambassador will be the icing on the cake for her whole Horse and Pony Project experience.

“Over the years, being involved in the project has given me a lot of confidence and communication skills,” Donaldson said. “When I was younger I had bad anxiety. I was very shy and couldn’t talk around people. This taught me how to talk to people, and being involved in leadership through the Horse and Pony Project taught me how to be organized and how to make decisions and carry them out.”

She said she has known for a long time that she wanted to work with horses and people throughout her life. Initially she had an interest in pursuing veterinary science, but she is so sensitive around injured animals that she has decided it might be difficult to work with animals that are in pain or dying. Instead, she now is looking into a future as an agriculture teacher and already is storing ideas about future lessons and potential community involvement projects.

Although she has more than a year to decide, Donaldson is looking at attending the UW-Platteville or the UW-River Falls which have good agriculture education programs.

Meanwhile, as equine ambassador for the county, Donaldson will be headed to the State Gymkhana Sept. 12-13 and the Wisconsin State Expo Sept. 17-20, where she will get to wear her crown and represent the Horse and Pony Project.

Her duties will wrap up at the 2016 Jefferson County Fair when she will assist at horse events before handing off the crown to her successor.

Donaldson said a lot of people have helped her get to this point, including LeAnn Kissner, who owns the horse farm where she works and where she rides every day; Jessica Pfeifer, her 4-H leader; her parents and sister for all their support; and trainer Brett Cumberledge, who taught her “a whole different way to show,” along with the 2014 Equine Ambassador, Natalie Ciciva and all of her mentors, both student and adult, in the Horse and Pony Project.