



***From dressage lessons to scholarship winner.***

*by Nan Meek*

When Rebecca Refaee began dressage lessons, she was on crutches. Complex regional pain syndrome, a chronic nervous system disorder that caused her intense knee pain, had prevented her from walking for more than two years. Those dressage lessons ignited a passion for horses that led in an unexpected direction.

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Now, just five years after those first dressage lessons, Rebecca is the recipient of the \$10,000 Woodside-area Equestrian Merit Scholarship Award, jointly sponsored by the Woodside-area Horse Owners Association (WHOA!) and the Mounted Patrol Foundation (MPF) to encourage high school seniors with a strong commitment to equestrian involvement, academic excellence, and contribution to their community.

This fall, Rebecca will begin studying for her undergraduate degree at Stanford University, where she expects to major in physics and ultimately, become a scientific researcher. She will continue her riding through Stanford Equestrian, where she also has big goals and high hopes.

Her track record of overcoming obstacles on her path to achievement says she will succeed.

### From Hippotherapy to Team Rider

“A physical therapist recommended hippotherapy as a last-ditch effort to decrease my pain,” Rebecca explained. “After countless doctors’ visits and physical therapy sessions without relief, I was willing to try anything. That was the best decision I ever made.”

A sweet grey Arabian took the novice rider from a “10 out of 10” on the pain scale, to increasing levels of comfort and freedom. “Riding helped to distract me from the pain. Better yet, hippotherapy treated my previously chronic condition. The angles of the saddle aligned my joints in such a way that helped to minimize the stress on my knees. In addition, riding a horse at the walk stopped the vicious pain feedback loop by forcing my nerves to focus on responding to the motion of the horse rather than the pain.”

Five months after beginning dressage lessons, Rebecca had improved enough to try out for Stanford’s Athletic Equestrian League, a Stanford program for fourth- through twelfth-grade students, ages 8 to 18. Now known as the Emerging IEA (Interscholastic Equestrian Association) team, it uses the same horses as Stanford’s collegiate team. She has qualified and competed at IEA regionals for two years, with accolades including Reserve High Point Award in her division, among others.

“I’ve made a lot of great friends through riding,” she related. “It’s great to get to talk with college students, younger kids, medical students – it’s a very welcoming community, and I feel so honored to be surrounded by so many great horse people.” She counts lessons from IEA coach Katie Steiner and Stanford assistant coach Tina Davey as highlights, and looks forward to working with Stanford head coach Vanessa Bartsch.

Rebecca is currently a novice rider for Stanford Red Barn’s Interscholastic Equestrian Association team and has lettered in dressage through the United States Equestrian Federation’s High School Equestrian Athlete Program. She has volunteered at Stanford horse shows and team tryouts, and next year she hopes to ride on both their Intercollegiate Horse Show Association hunt seat team and Intercollegiate Dressage Association dressage team.

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“Every day, I am amazed that I have gone from not even being able to walk, to competing as a full-fledged equestrian,” Rebecca remarked.



### Focus on Academic Excellence

Rebecca recalled schoolwork as an escape from pain during middle school, but as dressage lessons and her participation in Stanford’s Interscholastic Equestrian Association improved her health and mobility, she found a different reason to love academics during her years at Homestead High School in Cupertino. “I really liked math and science, and that’s when I discovered my passion for physics,” she remembered.

A straight-A student, including advanced placement as well as college courses, Rebecca’s academic involvement included serving her high school as Vice President of the Animal Welfare Club and President of the Spanish Club, and achieving her black belt in Tae Kwon Do.

Her academic awards include being named a National Merit Scholar and AP Scholar with Honor, and she has been inducted into the Sigma Xi Scientific Research Honor Society, where she presented her research paper. She also received the Youth Mentorship Award at Jasper Ridge Farm.

At Stanford this fall, she will study physics and conduct research to prepare for a physics PhD program and ultimately, her dream career: scientific researcher.

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Summer internships have given her practical experience as well as inspiration for her future. As a physics research intern at UC Santa Cruz, Rebecca discovered two previously unknown types of nanomagnetic lattices, which could eventually lead to the use of magnets instead of electronics in computers. As an astronautics research assistant at Stanford University, she worked to find materials that protect spacecraft from the damaging effects of hypervelocity impact plasma.

To help interest and educate other girls in STEM, Rebecca developed an app that is available in the Apple App Store, called “Anatomy Whiz”. Several schools now use her app in their coursework, and use of the app has (so far) spread to 40 countries and been translated into Spanish.



### Volunteering with Horses Helping People

“I love volunteering at Jasper Ridge Farm,” Rebecca said. She became an assistant animal socializer and youth volunteer, helping children facing emotional and physical challenges through therapeutic interaction with animals. “Meeting new families, hearing their stories and experiences, there’s something to be learned from all of them. Seeing how brave they are makes me remember my own story and reminds me how far I’ve been able to come.”

Rebecca has also volunteered at Sunday Friends, where she helped low-income families learn English, and served as a counselor at Camp Cardinal, Stanford’s youth horse riding camp.

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“I have had so many meaningful experiences with horses,” she recalled, ticking them off one by one. “Goal setting, learning from my coaches’ critiques where you learn to fix one thing, and then fix another. Learning the dedication and discipline necessary for good communication with your horse, and how to be in tune with him, especially in dressage. How to be observant, because horses are so aware of their surroundings, and to be empathetic and compassionate to horses – they are life lessons, as well as riding lessons.”