

# It Starts with Knowledge



WORDS BY Alex Mullarky



“Responsible, sustainable and ethical horse ownership starts with knowledge,” proclaims the official website of Equiculture - a term that encapsulates so much.

Jane and Stuart Myers' business covers everything from land management to horse welfare and rider biomechanics. Before even meeting the couple, it's clear from their range of books, workshops, talks and articles that knowledge and education are incredibly important to them both.

I spoke to Jane and Stuart from their caravan home in Queensland, in which they spend half of every year, teaching and touring, when they aren't doing the same on the other side of the globe.

Both grew up in the United Kingdom and, now, they return on an annual basis, developing the business they run together. They are the rare kind of couple who can not only work together every day, but support, encourage and bring out the best in one another.

Jane fell in love with horses early. She got her first horse at 11 after many years of lessons and began teaching riding at the age of only 14. In her words, it was “ridiculous because I didn't know anything - but I thought I did.”

Having suffered from hearing loss all her life, Jane left school with no qualifications, at a time when the only aid to her hearing was being seated near the front of the class. “I opted out,” she explains. “I attended in body, but I certainly wasn't there in spirit. I wrote my name at the top of the exam papers and didn't even attempt to write on them.”

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However, as soon as she could read, Jane discovered she could teach herself. “I found that researching via reading was my best way of learning. I'm still very much like that now - I love to read and research [on my own].”

Stuart, on the other hand, had minimal experience with horses when he met Jane. He'd had a good education and become qualified as a youth worker, and it was he who encouraged Jane to go back to school and then to university.

“I actually jokingly call Jane my Eliza Doolittle,” he laughs. She certainly took the task in hand. Returning to education at 23, Jane had completed her A Levels (VCE equivalent), Bachelor's Degree and a Masters Degree in Equine Science by the age of 30.

“Jane's hearing really held her back,” Stuart explains. “She had to put a Dictaphone on the desk at the front of the lecture theatre and every night she had to transcribe it. She worked really hard.”

Stuart's pride in his wife is apparent. His rather different background gave him a unique perspective on their equestrian life together. “He won't admit it, but he is an exceptionally bright person,” says Jane. Stuart was a youth worker for more than 20 years before taking on full-time responsibilities with Equiculture.

“Looking at how people can achieve things they don't think they can - that's where my passion lies,” he says. “Not sure why, but I often see things from a different perspective to most people and I use this insight to offer alternatives which help to create change in people mainly, but recently in horses.”

However, not being a horse person gave Stuart a fresh take on the equestrian world. “I'm not a horse person. I haven't got that ‘horse gene’, but I do understand them. I've got a background in human behaviour, so I looked at the culture of the horse world and I've always asked questions about it.”

When the pair emigrated to Australia to set up their own horse property, Stuart's questioning attitude changed the way they managed their land. As Jane recalls, “Stuart was constantly saying ‘Why are we pushing the wheelbarrow through the wind and the rain and the mud to horses standing right out at the other end of the property? Why on earth can't they come to us?’”

"I said 'Because that's just the way it is, Stuart, that's just what we do!'" Eventually, they developed The Equicentral System: a method of horse management which has minimal impact on the land, and saves time and effort on the part of horse owners. Using this method, horses are kept in herds, which return to a central area to be fed, watered, and loaf on a surface that protects the soil beneath.

"It revolutionised our lives," says Jane. "The amount of time it saves; the horses are calmer; there are massive land management benefits - you don't have any mud issues if it's wet; you don't have any dust issues if it's dry." As it was their first property, they were forced to be creative. "We only had limited resources and a lot of things to do," says Stuart. "We're always looking at ways we can improve things."

"I've always maintained that when you don't have much money and you have to think your way through problems, you're much more inventive. You have to be much more of a problem solver. So, that's been our ethos," says Jane.

While living in Victoria, Jane taught in the Equine Science program at Melbourne University but, when the couple relocated to Queensland and replicated their successful system, they began to think of ways to share it.

Jane wrote a book for CSIRO entitled 'Managing Horses on Small Properties' and, not long after, they were asked to give a talk on the topic. A local council resource manager attended and realised she had found the solution to an ongoing problem in Australia.

They cover innumerable horsekeeping topics in their body of work, but Jane and Stuart's passion and focus clearly lies in passing on the knowledge and understanding of the horse world that they have gained.

Jane and Stuart were horse people teaching land management. It was a unique combination that would allow them to effectively communicate land management practices to other horse people - they spoke the same language. In the 10 years since, Jane and Stuart have delivered their talks on behalf of local councils, Landcare groups and Water Catchment Authorities around the states of Australia.

In 2012, Jane was the recipient of a Winston Churchill Fellowship, a program which enables Australians to travel overseas in the pursuit of knowledge in their chosen field. Together, Jane and Stuart travelled to the United States for eight weeks to investigate sustainable horsekeeping practices and deliver a few talks while they were there.

"Some really interesting things are happening in the States," Jane recalls. "But, we found that Australia is actually quite advanced in this subject. In the States, it's quite similar to the United Kingdom in that the government doesn't really see the need to educate horse owners about land management, whereas Australia does."

It was during their travels in America that Jane developed a sore throat and a small lump in her neck. On their return to the United Kingdom, she was diagnosed with throat cancer - a great shock to a woman who had never smoked and always ate healthily. She was told that she risked losing her tongue. "They grounded Jane in the United Kingdom for almost a year, undergoing intensive treatment," says Stuart.

"What we believe is that there's always a silver lining to every cloud," says Jane. "By the time I was at the end of the treatment I was in a wheelchair, couldn't speak and was being fed through a stomach tube. But, once I'd recovered from that, initially it was easier to write than anything else, so I wrote my two Horse Rider's Mechanic books and now, three years later, we've just finished rewriting all our other books, plus another new one."

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Stuart took over delivering the talks, continuing even when Jane was fully recovered. "We found that Stuart's really good at the talks," Jane explains. "He really enjoys it and people really enjoy him."

The subsequent change in routine also allowed Jane to pursue her interest in rider biomechanics, which she explores in her Horse Rider's Mechanic books and clinics. Her interest in the topic stemmed from reading Sally Swift's Centred Riding at a young age. As she reflects, "That book really was a - what's the word?"

"Revelation," Stuart supplies.

"Yeah, a revelation. That really was the first of its kind." Jane continued to explore similar books as they were published, but her own take on the subject is rooted in her experience as a riding instructor. "I decided to market myself to mature women - not just women but, as you know in the horse industry, it tends to be women - who are either learning to ride for the first time, or are returning to riding. That's a huge group of people. Rightly or wrongly, a lot of coaches actually avoid those people. They prefer to teach people who are highly competitive."

Jane focused on what her students were feeling at all times and developed her methods around that, but her approach is always adaptive. "I'm always reading more things, watching other people, always thinking of other ideas."

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"This sounds cliché, but we believe that we're making a huge difference to people's lives, and the lives of horses too," says Stuart. "We can see that change when we get feedback from people about how their lives have changed and how their horses and properties have come on... We've seen a real change in the way people are thinking about horsekeeping in the last 5-10 years and we've certainly been part of that. It's quite significant when you feel like you've made a difference to people."

Jane chips in - "And horses!"