

≈ COLORFUL ≈

DOING HER HOMEWORK

A dedicated student of the breed, Natalie Tanaka is working hard to preserve two of Morgandom's rarest colors.



Seven-year-old Natalie Tanaka was on the phone again. Not, as one might expect, talking to her friends. Not catching up with a grandparent or other family member. Instead, she was talking to complete strangers... about their horses for sale.

By Laura Hornick Behning

For several years, young Natalie had poured over the weekly Pennysaver ad paper in search of her perfect horse. "It was endearing to overhear Natalie's inquiries to adults regarding horses for sale," her mother Denise recalls. "Every week, she would scan ads in the paper and promptly call from the private bedroom extension those that seemed promising. Her list of requirements included safety, temperament, and experience, so she quickly ruled out the young and barrel racers." Natalie's confidence with adults was unusual for such a young child. "My mom says I asked some pretty technical questions for a kid. I still do," Natalie says. "I was obsessed. I still am."

One such lengthy phone conversation couldn't be ignored. The kind patience of this owner, who gave "Utah's" age as 17 with parade experience and gentle demeanor, brought Natalie's mother to the phone. "This was the one," Denise says.

As a birthday surprise for Natalie, her parents purchased Utah and boarded her for a short time just across the road from their home. The mare had to be hidden to avoid being seen by Natalie, who was always checking out the neighbor horses. "At my eighth birthday party, I was called around to the back of the house where my parents stood with my pretty chestnut mare, ribbons braided in her mane and tail," Natalie remembers. "It was truly one of the best days of my life."

Utah and her young charge spent many afternoons in the orange groves, riding through the hills of a developing California. The mare became Natalie's best friend and they were together every day after school on the trails, as well as participating in local

ABOVE: The grand old progenitor of dun Morgans, Robbi-Sue's Sweet Success (Equinox Beaubrook x Robbi-Sue Misalert), with Natalie Tanaka up.

INSETS: The grulla mare Lady Dun D Duchess with her 2017 grulla filly, MHB Duchess Of Zulu (by Robbi-Sue's Sweet Success); Robbi-Sue's Sweet Success with Natalie's niece, Mia Tanaka, up (photos by MaryBeth Houlahan, Jodi Thorpe).



TOP ROW: The black silver stallion LM Sterling Shining Knight (LM Sterling Shining Knight x MLF Emotion) is just beginning his career at Mountain Home Morgans. He will stand at Bulrush Equine Center in Michigan City, Indiana, this summer (photo by Arika Eggleston); MHB Sterling Rain (LM Sterling Shining Knight x MOA Irish Lady), 2017 black silver filly, owned by Lou Ann Gaskell. **BOTTOM ROW:** MHB Sterling Rain with Natalie Tanaka and Lou Ann Gaskell at the 2018 Idaho Horse Expo; Natalie with some of her 2017 foal crop at Mountain Home Morgans. Left to right: black silver filly MHB Sterling Rain, grulla filly MHB Duchess Of Zulu (Robbi-Sue's Sweet Success x Lady Dun D Duchess), and grulla colt MHB Bacchus' Blessing (Ragtime Dun D x Alpinemist Blessing). MHB Sterling Savoir Faire (JKM Platnum Blue x Polished Sterling Silver), 2016 buckskin silver filly, pictured last summer as a yearling (photo by Arika Eggleston).

4-H shows and parades. "I rode Utah vigilantly until we moved to Maryland for my father's job transfer when I was twelve. Utah was tearfully given to a family friend when we left," Natalie says.

Natalie's heritage is a wonderful illustration of the famous American melting pot. Her mother Denise is Caucasian, and her father Jun is Japanese. Jun was born in 1942, "a big year in American history," says Natalie. "He was born on the way to a Japanese internment camp, in a gymnasium near Walnut Grove, California.

His family spent several years at the Amache camp in Colorado. His memory is vague on the matter and his older family members were fairly tight lipped on the subject. Growing up Japanese wasn't something to be proud of at the time, and as a result he tried very hard to integrate into the American ideal. He spoke Japanese, but regrettably did not teach any of us three kids to do the same." Natalie's two brothers were not interested in horses, "which just meant more saddle time for me," Natalie says with a smile.



The 2015 homozygous dun stallion Tocara's Double Dose (Lineback Double Take x Coachmans Tsunami), pictured here as a three-year-old, May 2018, is currently in training at Moonridge Morgans. His first foals arrive this year (photo by Jodi Thorpe).

After the Tanakas moved to Maryland, Natalie had a variety of equine experiences. "I liked the excitement of jumping, but I found the actual experience of showing and preparation nerve wracking," she says. "I then got a job exercising polo ponies and loved the athleticism and speed of those animals. I worked for a wonderful man all through high school, and while my equitation went to the wayside, my ability to ride almost anything vastly improved."

While on break from her studies as an Animal Science major at Louisiana State University, Natalie taught riding one summer at Camp Vega in Kents Hill, Maine. It was there that she discovered the Morgan breed. "My first experience with Morgans was a little firecracker of a mare when I worked at Camp Vega," Natalie remembers. "This little chestnut mare had a heart bigger than her. One day I was schooling her over jumps, and as we were making a turn, she thought I was aiming toward the arena fence. She gamely pricked her ears and was prepared to give it a go when I realized what she thought I wanted her to do. I reined her back in, but her plucky spirit and willingness have always stuck with me." The

mare's registered name is lost to the sands of time, but she had left an unforgettable impression on Natalie.

After college, Natalie lived in Fort Collins, Colorado, for a decade before moving to Victor, Idaho, to take a job with SkyWest Airlines. While working at Jackson Airport in 2010, Natalie met Ryan Wells. She soon discovered he raised Morgans under the TRW prefix. "He had some Morgans that needed miles and I jumped at the chance," Natalie says. Her main ride was an unregistered bay gelding [by a Caduceus Ixion son and out of Syringa Classy Dancer] named "Rip."

"I fell in love," Natalie says. "Rip had so much go and unending stamina. He was a perfect match for these rugged Teton Mountains. I distinctly remember being on a very steep and treacherous trail on the Sleeping Indian mountain outside of Jackson. Rip was fresh and felt good. He was buzzed up and sassier than I was comfortable with on that steep of a side hill. It was a drop of several hundred feet if we went off. I willed myself not to look down, as I could hear pebbles pinging down the shale-covered mountain. I dropped

my stirrups just in case Rip slipped. Then something changed. Rip looked around, put his head down like a tired plow horse and plodded through that scary stretch of trail. I couldn't figure what brought about the change in his attitude. As soon as we were on firm footing, Rip fired back up again and started his antics. I realized that this was a horse smart enough to realize jeopardy and take us out of it safely." Natalie had ridden polo ponies and Thoroughbreds, so she knew what a hot horse was like to ride. But here was a horse that was able to immediately dial that down when needed. "All the spirit and fire of the hot breeds, with the sanity to self preserve. I was completely hooked," Natalie says.

Ryan adds, "Rip had the honor of carrying her down the aisle at her wedding. She also bought his weanling half brother TRW Skyjack, who now goes by 'Junior.' Junior is now her go-to horse for taking out rookies, Teton County, Wyoming citizen's mounted unit, and for trail rides where she just wants to relax and enjoy the ride."

A NEW VENTURE

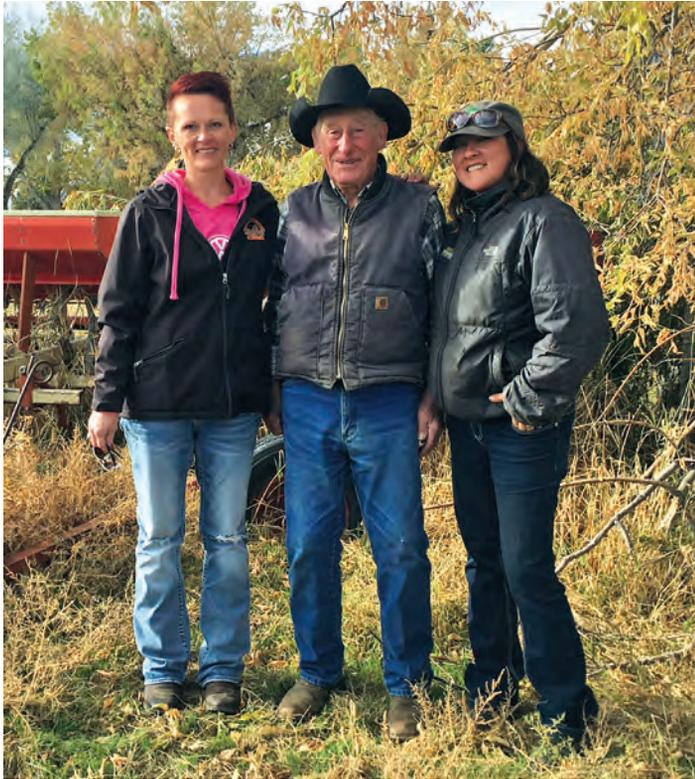
Seeing Ryan's foals every spring had Natalie thinking about starting her own breeding program. She had discovered that Morgans were scarce in southeast Idaho and western Wyoming and set about to remedy that single-handedly. "I began my incessant research and literally couldn't turn my brain off at night," she says. "My world was colored in the pink and blue of All Breed Pedigree. I knew I wanted Morgans that looked like Morgans, and temperament is something I will not compromise on." She selected mares that fit her criteria, which led her to some wonderful mentors in the breed. "I have the great fortune of having one of the oldest Morgan breeding programs very close to me," Natalie says. "Myrtle Neeley's bloodlines were carried on by her grandsons. Jared Neeley and his wife, Angela, have supplied me with several excellent mares, as well as countless dinner table advice sessions and constructive criticism viewpoints. I love running ideas and bloodlines past Jared; he doesn't sugar coat anything and has been an invaluable source of bloodline information."

Natalie had been drawn to grullas since seeing one owned by one of her childhood



MHB Riverdance (Robbi-Sue's Sweet Success x MOA Irish Lady), 2015 black gelding, and owner Lou Ann Gaskell on the trail challenge course at the 2018 Idaho Horse Expo.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Angela Neeley, Bill Jackson, and Natalie Tanaka at the Jackson Ranch, October 2017; Amy Ehlers, on her Paint Horse Tux, leading the red dun yearling colt, MHB Christopher Tracy (MEMC Poet x Alpinemist Cameo Rose), in Kelly Canyon, near Ririe, Idaho, last summer; Alexis Pappas-Rushing and her 2016 black silver filly, MHB Lady Sterling Dove (LMSterling Shining Knight x Lady Dun D Duchess).



4-H friends. She soon discovered Morgans came in dun and was determined to include them in her new herd. Ryan and Natalie partnered on the purchase of the bay dun mare, WMS Laurel Sweet Sandy (Robbi-Sue's Sweet Success x WMS Laurel Lady Hanna) and had her shipped west in the summer of 2013. "More incessant research followed, and all roads led to the bay dun stallion, Robbi-Sue's Sweet Success ['Zeke']," Natalie says. "He was the dun kingpin! He looked so noble and kind in photos. Unbelievably, a few months later I saw an ad offering him to a new lease home. Despite the fact that I did not own any Morgan mares except his daughter, I was compelled to call his then-lessee Sherry Siebenaler. Sherry told me how wonderful and sweet Zeke was and, though I had never owned a stallion, I knew this was the one for me. After hearing about Zeke's many good qualities and hashing over the logistics of stallion management, I decided to go for it and bring him across country. I spoke with Tami Kikta, his longtime owner. She was very protective of him and put me through the wringer. I appreciated her sincere concern for his well-being. Tami agreed to lease him indefinitely, and Mountain Home Morgans had their first herd sire."

"When Zeke got off the trailer in the fall of 2013 after his long journey from Vermont to Idaho, I really felt like I was meeting a celebrity. He had such a regal demeanor and swagger to him. The pictures didn't do him justice. Zeke has an unbeatable temperament, and in the years since has set the bar very high for stallion behavior.

He is kind, gentle, wise, and my absolute heart horse."

The first foal for Natalie's fledgling breeding program arrived in 2014 from the black mare Amador Merry Bell, who had been purchased in foal to Flower Of Alliance. Merry Bell foaled a big bay colt with no problems. "He was skittish, but day three was quieter," Natalie remembers. "Day four was mellow. Day five when I went out to see him he tried to get up and staggered. I had the vet out. He had a burst bladder. We rushed him to a hospital an hour away, but he died in surgery. Pete, Merry Bell, and I cried all the way home. That was my introduction to breeding. I wasn't sure if I was strong enough to go on, but with a new little herd, I had to." It was the kind of event that has ended many breeding programs, but it simply made Natalie more determined than ever.

"On my quest for mares, I was fortunate to be buying when the economy was downturned," Natalie says. Some of her best foundation mares came from the Neeleys, as they were downsizing. The quest for colorful mares led her to the grulla, Lady Dun D Duchess, who Natalie saw when she was shopping up at KDA Morgans in Washington in 2015. "In addition to her lovely Funquest breeding and color, she has all the conformation components and temperament I want in a mare," Natalie says. The following year she purchased a cremello mare, APH Blank Cheque ("Pearl"), although she was initially unsure about the double cream dilutes because of their different look. "After researching, I came across



LEFT TO RIGHT: MHB Vestara Khai (LMSterling Shining Knight x Camas Mist Snips June), 2017 black silver filly owned by Melissa Baldwin; Natalie found the perfect match for Winnie Welker in Teton Red Hawk (Siridian Mighty Mouse x SH Silver Lady), 2010 flaxen chestnut gelding.

Pearl in Nebraska. She was curvy and feminine yet stout. I kept painting her bay or chestnut in my mind, and I still loved her.” Pearl was sent to Moonridge Morgans to start her saddle training. “After only a 30-day start, they said she was ready to go home,” Natalie continues. “She was just that quiet and accommodating. They also wanted to buy her for their kids. Always a good sign when the trainer wants the horse! Pearl is the perfect combination that I expect in one of our mares—they must have wonderful temperaments and build to go with their color.”

The silver dilution was another color that fascinated Natalie. At that time there were fewer than 70 silver Morgans in the breed, and she was determined to help preserve them. “In my search for silver Morgans, all roads pointed to Linda Sterling,” Natalie says. “She had a banner few years producing silvers. She was very kind and patient with my many silver questions. The Silver Dapple Morgans Project [silverdapplemorganproject.com] website was my encyclopedia; I still refer to that on lineages I’m unfamiliar with, and as a source to dig up any silvers for sale. I have called the owner of one of the first silver mares Linda bred in Arizona to see if she’d part with her mare. I’m always hunting for hidden silvers!” In May of 2015, the then-yearling black silver colt LMSterlings Mojo (ML Sterling Shining Knight x MLF Emotion), bred by Linda, joined Natalie’s growing herd. Mojo’s first foal, the black silver filly MHB Sterling Rain (out of MOA Irish Lady) arrived last year.

Natalie found another product of Linda Sterling’s program, a black silver mare named Polished Sterling Silver, at Coulee Bend Morgans in Galahad, Alberta in early 2016. “Polly is such a nice silver mare; she looks like a Morgan with her pretty neck and stout body. After realizing that importing from Canada isn’t really that complicated, I purchased her in foal to the perlino stallion JKM Platnum Blue,” Natalie says. That spring, Polly foaled the beautiful, silver buckskin filly, MHB Sterling Savoir Faire, now a two-year-old. These two mares are major assets in Natalie’s silver program. As a homage to Linda, Natalie adds “Sterling” to the name of every silver she breeds.

Rounding out the current stallion lineup at Mountain Home

Morgans is a youngster—the 2015 bay dun, Tocara’s Double Dose (Lineback Double Take x Coachman’s Tsunami)—and a senior gent—the 1995 black stallion Caduceus Pericles (Wyoming Flyhawk x Caduceus Allegra). Tocaras Double Dose (“Dante”) is currently in training at Moonridge Morgans and doing well. His first foals will arrive this year. Caduceus Pericles was the result of a long search for a foundation-bred stallion to use on Natalie’s foundation mares. “I really hit the jackpot when I found Caduceus Pericles,” Natalie says. “I saw a post with a filly by him last year. I assumed it was frozen semen that produced her, since I wasn’t aware of any Caduceus stallions still in service. I inquired and lo and behold, this incredible black stallion was alive and well in Michigan. He has such old blood so close up, he’s like a generational time machine. His owner agreed to sell, but I really wanted to make sure he was kind. I had a local breeder friend, Cassie Thomas, go assess him for me. She immediately said if I didn’t want him, she did! So we decided to partner on him. He will stand in Idaho until midsummer and will head to Michigan after that. I am beyond excited to see what this stallion produces for us.”

DEDICATED STUDENT OF THE BREED

Natalie researches prospective additions to her herd with the same obsession she had in tracking down her perfect childhood horse. No stone is left unturned; all potential leads are followed up on. “I love to sift through the AMHA registry looking at pedigrees I admire,” Natalie says. “I will look at progeny and have made many phone calls inquiring about a horse I dug up on the internet. There are so many quality Morgans sitting dormant in pastures. I love finding gems on Craigslist. Even if I’m not in the market, I like to find out who they are and share them with potential Morgan buyers.”

Studying pedigrees takes up a great deal of Natalie’s time, but she knows it must go hand in hand with consideration of the actual horses in front of her. “I love looking at my horses objectively and trying to create the best cross I can,” she says. “I think it is important to not be barn blind and look at a horse’s faults and strengths. One can make crosses on paper all day, but

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when it's a living breathing animal, that changes things. Sometimes it becomes very apparent what is good or bad after I study the actual two horses I am contemplating." While some breeders select breeding stock based on superficial qualities, without digging deeper into what their lineage actually represents, Natalie ferrets out every tidbit regarding her Morgans' ancestors. 'Book learning' is only the first part of the challenge faced by a dedicated scholar of the breed; seeing representatives of many different bloodlines in the flesh, and speaking to owners and breeders, is the second. Natalie has this aspect well in hand. "I have been very fortunate to have had wonderful and supportive Morgan gurus in my short tenure in the breeding business," she says. "My local friend Ryan Wells and his wife Terry of TRW Morgans have been a fantastic source of knowledge and brainstorming. Jared and Angela Neeley have been an incredible support system. I love plunking myself down at their table and seeing legendary Morgans of yesteryear as stories of these horses come to life with their photographs. Jared's bluntness and honesty has struck a chord with me and he has given me fantastic advice over the years, whether I like it or not!"

Natalie is a veritable sponge for information when meeting other Morgan breeders. "Ann Moyer of Charger Morgans in Victor, Idaho, has a discerning eye and she really knows her Western working bloodlines. I called Bobbi Blankenship [TruWest Morgans] one time and immediately was engulfed in her warm, wise, witty banter. When I made it up to Montana to meet her and her lovely daughter, Sally Birkelo, I really felt like I was part of the family. I especially admire their business acumen coupled with genuine compassion; all good lessons I would love to follow. Arika Eggelston of KDA Morgans in Spokane, Washington has been an irreplaceable sounding board for me. I first met her when I bought a stallion from her and we realized we have very similar tastes in Morgans. If I want to know more about an obscure bloodline, I call her since she and her family have been quietly in this business for decades. Through the years we have sold each other horses more than once! Sherry Siebenaler still remains one of my dear friends. We try to go to Grand Nationals together yearly, where we stay up way too late poring over old issues of *The Morgan Horse* magazine. I hope to make the trek to Vermont sooner than later to see her fine breeding program. We managed to swing by Hazelrun Morgans while we were on Oklahoma City and met some of Carrie Hazel's old lines."

"Last summer I tried to make it to the local Morgan breeders," Natalie continues. "Bill Jackson's ranch is an amazing place. I truly felt like I was in the presence of Morgan royalty, especially given that I had brought Jared and Angela Neeley with me on that trek. Bill has a sharp eye and mind that remembers many bloodlines. I also had the pleasure of visiting Chris Holm's Devine Morgans and looking at some of the nicest Lippitts I have ever seen. Chris was such a warm soul on a chilly day. While there, we swung by Roy Foote's Treasure Morgans. Roy took us into his dining room and showed us a wealth of old photos and registration certificates. The Western working lines were evident in his horses, even his 35-year-old stallion."

"Two years ago I made the trek up to the first annual Canadian Open Barn at Lisa Hammel's ranch and was fortunate to meet some wonderful Canadian Morgan breeders and their horses. Dana

Crossland [GiddyUp Morgans] took us in and we had a wonderful experience with her amazing horses. I was really taken aback by how much bone and size Dana's horses had, yet managed to maintain type. The open barn was a fantastic way to meet many Morgan people, all there for the same reason—our shared love of the breed."

THE RANCH

Natalie's expanding herd of Morgans needed room to roam, so in 2014 she and husband Pete Welker purchased 56 acres in Victor, Idaho, complete with spectacular views of the Tetons. "It belonged to an old farmer who had passed, and his kids didn't want to farm," Natalie explains. "We fell in love with its running creek with big mature trees flanking it. There was nothing else there except barbed wire, dandelions, beauty, and dreams!" Pete, who is a custom home builder in Jackson, Wyoming (one of the wealthiest zip codes in the country), had the vision to build their dream ranch on the couple's new property. Pete's business of 20 years is his Mountain Home Builders, so MHB became the prefix for Natalie's breeding program.

"We dug massive, nine-foot deep channels through it for our automatic waterers," Natalie says. "It has been designed for less maintenance. Well, maybe one day! We built the shop first, followed by the barn that had to be dismantled in Utah and moved up to Idaho board by board. In the meantime, we had sold our old place, so we made do in a camper while we built our house. It is now approaching the finishing stages and is a work of art perfectly situated on the land with huge windows that overlook the foal pasture."

Natalie is grateful for her husband's contribution to her Morgan endeavors. "In addition to being the heavy equipment operator, Pete has been a continuous sounding board for my ideas and plans for the program's future," she says. "He reins me in when necessary and offers solid business advice. Despite the fact the horses cause him much extra work, he will take time to cuddle with the babies. He has a sense of fun and whimsy despite his intense workload. When remodeling a house, he was requested to remove a teepee. He thought that would be an interesting addition to our fire pit area and zip line."

"Pete has a grand vision for the ranch, including building luxury cabins for vacation rentals. We plan to start renting them summer 2018 and include some horse camping sites. Our proximity to Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks will be an asset in this next Mountain Home endeavor!"

"SUCCESS"-FUL MARKETING

The average foal crop at Mountain Home Morgans is five foals, with some years as many as nine. Because of the harsh climate, they are born a little later in the spring. The mares and foals are kept close to the house for the first few weeks before going out to pasture. Visitors to Mountain Home Morgans are treated to a mob of friendly youngsters that drop whatever they're doing to socialize. "It is such a nice compliment when people come to visit and are amazed how friendly our horses are," Natalie says. "Zeke has made some lovely babies for us, and they all seem to have that draw to people. These are the Morgans I want to create to share with others."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Natalie Tanaka on her go-to gelding TRW Skyjac (JMF Wild Cruiser x TRW Chrissy's Doll), leading the cremello mare APH Black Cheque (Cashen In x Red Rose Siloet) during their Victorian dress photo shoot, winter 2017 (photos by Lou Ann Gaskell), and working crowd control with the Teton County Citizen's Mounted Unit at the 2016 Jackson, Wyoming, Fourth of July parade.

Available MHB Morgans are posted on Facebook and the ranch's website. Natalie jokes that her website designer (that would be me!) "prefers me to brush them before posting photos on my Mountain Home Morgans Facebook page. But I do like to see the horses in their natural state. Mine are very furry in the winter, but that makes them tough and able to handle our rugged Idaho climate. I have had good success by just having a website. It's nice to be able to put a pedigree and photo together, and I think Laura has done a classy job with my site."

Natalie has learned a lot about buying and selling etiquette through her horse purchasing experiences. "In my horse buying escapades, I have been pretty fortunate, however I have learned how I want to conduct myself in business by having some less than perfect interactions," she says. "I think honesty is key. I like to tell people what's wrong with a horse before what's right. I never want to make people buy a horse they're on the fence about. I want them to be all in. No doubts. I think everyone that takes their time to reach out to me is worthy of a call or email back. Plus, I love to talk Morgans!"

The lucky new owners of Morgans from Natalie's breeding program are consistent in their praise of her and her horses. Local client Alexis Pappas-Rushing had a memory of a colt she had known when she was ten years old. She had wanted to buy the colt, but her parents said no. The experience was devastating. When she was invited to Natalie's ranch in 2016 and was surrounded by the MHB foals, that memory came flooding back. She felt like the proverbial kid in a candy store. "I told Natalie I had to have one of these adorable foals," Alexis says. "She told me I had to think about it for a month. She said, 'you must be sure.' I said 'OK.' I counted the days and went over constantly to look at this beautiful little filly named MHB Lady Sterling Dove [LMSterling Shining Knight x Lady Dun D Duchess]. Her special little face with her long eye lashes and Disney personality stole my heart! The month passed, and I told Natalie I had to have her. Finally, I am living my dream to raise my own horse from a foal. 'Love Dove' is now two years old. She is a combination of boldness, awareness, strength, and a willingness to learn. She does not disappoint in any way. Every day is a joy working with her, loving her."

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New blood is a necessity for the survival of any breed, and Natalie has had much success in selling her horses to first-time Morgan owners. To her delight, they often become repeat customers! Such is the case with Lou Ann Gaskell, who found Mountain Home Morgans in 2015 during her search for a black horse. “I’d always owned Quarter Horses, but there were no black ones to be found at the time,” Lou Ann says. “I came upon the Mountain Home Morgans website and gave Natalie a call inquiring about her black gelding she had listed for sale. Apparently, this was a bait and switch tactic of Natalie’s, because Junior was not for sale, but a three-week-old black foal was! Long story short, I bought her adorable black with chrome Morgan foal, MHB Riverdance, sight unseen. I knew nothing about Morgan pedigrees, but quickly learned that my foal’s sire was the well-known bay dun, Robbi-Sue’s Sweet Success, out of a gorgeous black mare, MOA Irish Lady.” MHB Riverdance (‘River’) is currently three, and Lou Ann says he is one of the most laid-back horses she’s ever known. “He is fearless, gentle, and kind. River’s disposition is so nice that I’ve done his groundwork and started his saddle training and cart training myself.”

After purchasing River as a weanling, Lou Ann still needed a black riding horse. Natalie introduced her to Arika Eggleston at KDA Morgans who had a five-year-old gelding for sale named KDA Hunting A Whisper. “I was truly impressed that Natalie not only connected me with a horse that wasn’t hers, but she also hosted me and my husband at her home when she’d never met us,” Lou Ann says. “Something clicked, and we’ve been good friends ever since.” Natalie encouraged Lou Ann’s newfound love for the Morgan breed, and invited her to join her at the 2016 Morgan Grand Nationals in Oklahoma City. “There were gorgeous horses everywhere, all groomed to the hilt! My excitement grew, and all I could think about was how to tell everyone how wonderful Morgans are,” Lou Ann says.

Attending the Grand National sparked an idea in Lou Ann: to compete in the Idaho Horse Expo’s Breed Challenge in 2017. “I’m a trail rider, not a show expert, but I had to attempt this if I wanted to share the wonderful world of Morgans,” she says. “Somehow, my excitement spread enough to get Natalie to travel to our Nampa, Idaho Horse Expo six hours away and support me with my presentation.” For the 2018 event, held April 13-15, Natalie and Lou Ann teamed up to present the Expo’s first-ever Morgan promotional booth to provide materials, answer questions, and have Morgans available for others to see.

Lou Ann’s Morgan adventure is just beginning. She purchased her third Morgan, the weanling black silver filly MHB Sterling Rain (LMSterlings Mojo x MOA Irish Lady), from Natalie last summer. Lou Ann says, “if I had 50 acres, I would truly buy more of Natalie’s horses—they are that nice!”

Maggie Morgan and her friend Amy Ehlers of Rigby, Idaho, are avid backcountry trail riding enthusiasts. The two chronicle their adventures on their blog, Wilderness Horseback Journeys (wildernesshorsebackjourneys.com), which has a big following in the trail riding community. They purchased the weanling red dun colt MHB Christopher Tracy (MEMC Poet x Alpinemist Cameo Rose) from Natalie late in 2016. ‘Cisco’ has been ponied along on trail rides with Amy and Maggie to get some early trail

experience, a process that builds confidence in youngsters still too young to be ridden. “Cisco is smart, confident, and sweet,” Maggie says. “He has been exposed to bridges, water, cows, hikers, downed timber, and mud. He follows well on the trail on and off lead. We found that towards the end of our trail rides Cisco would get pesky while on the lead, often bothering the horse in front of him, so we let him go free. He shot off a few times to explore, but for the most part follows the trail keeping up with us quite well. We need a breed that can withstand tough terrain, be sure-footed and handle many hours on long trails. We are so impressed with our colt’s willing attitude and personality that Amy now leases his beautiful dam, who is in foal for a full sibling to Cisco. It looks like Wilderness Horseback Journeys is going to be mostly Morgan steeds in the future! Natalie has a special place in our hearts because she brought this little horse into our lives. We are Morgan fans for life!”

Melissa Baldwin of Michigan City, Indiana, has had a fascination with silver Morgans dating back to 2007 after she discovered Linda Sterling’s Sterling Morgans. “Linda had the good fortune of producing a high percentage of silver foals by her stallion Zeulners Silver Legacy,” she explains. “I loved looking at the pictures of her horses, telling myself that one day I would have one to call my own. At that time, there were not many silver dapple Morgans within the breed, but as I kept on searching and learning, I realized that Morgans with the silver dilution were not necessarily going to decline in population—they were too unique for that, and the people breeding them were dedicated to preserving and increasing their numbers. I knew that if I gave them time, I would have my chance to own one.”

A decade later, her waiting finally paid off. Melissa noticed the black silver mare Polished Sterling Silver at Coulee Bend Morgans in Canada. Unfortunately, ‘Polly’ sold before Melissa had a chance to inquire about her. She soon discovered Polly’s new home was Natalie’s Mountain Home Morgans. “As I perused Natalie’s website and viewed all her horses, I decided this was the place I wanted to possibly purchase my first silver Morgan,” Melissa says. “I told Natalie what I was looking for. At the time, she did not have any young horses available. She then referred me to a few of her friends that had silvers for sale, but as I looked through websites, I realized that I wanted one of Natalie’s horses and I was willing to wait. After all, I had waited ten years for this opportunity—a few more months or another year was not going to change my mind.” Not too long after that, Natalie added the grulla mare Camas Mist Snips June to her herd. June was in foal to the black silver, LM Sterling Shining Knight. “This was possibly my chance to get my first silver, so I inquired about June’s foal before it was born,” Melissa says. “On April 11, 2017 June delivered a beautiful silver dapple filly. We named her MHB Sterling Vestara Khai. ‘V,’ as she is lovingly called, was perfect and a dream come true. My husband and I decided to take our summer vacation in Victor, Idaho, so we could meet our new baby and also the wonderful lady that helped fulfill a decade long dream of mine, Natalie Tanaka.”

Melissa and her husband Scott, a veterinarian, are opening their new Bulrush Equine Center in Michigan City this summer. Natalie’s young black silver stallion, LMSterlings Mojo, is moving

to the new facility for training and will also stand at stud while there. “I am eternally grateful for Natalie Tanaka and her horses,” Melissa says. “The friendship, trust, and dedication she has shown to me is priceless.”

The great care Natalie takes in matching her foals with their new owners also extends to those that don't carry the MHB prefix. Winnie Welker of Ucon, Idaho had retired early and was ready to spend some quality ‘horse time’ on the trails, as well as learning a new discipline: Cowboy Dressage. However, she soon discovered her Arabian gelding was miserable in this new discipline. She began to think about buying a second horse, and she'd always liked Morgans, but never owned one. “I had been researching various Morgan breeders, not knowing much about breeding, but I knew I liked the look of the older foundation type Morgans,” Winnie says. “I also knew that above all temperament was paramount to me. I kept going back to Natalie's Facebook page and website. In the spring of 2016 she began to post pictures of her new babies and I was totally smitten. I just knew one of those beautiful babies was coming home with me! That summer I made a visit to Natalie's Mountain Home Morgans. Oh my gosh, of course those babies were gorgeous. They were all personable, curious, and in your pocket. But more important, I found Natalie to be incredibly open, honest, and welcoming with an over-the-top passion for the Morgan horse. I was enthralled with her incredible knowledge of breeding lines. Her husband later told me she studies them like we read books, even if she's on some exercise machine.”

Natalie introduced Winnie to all the babies she had admired online, talking about their lines, traits, and potential. She met the mares and the stallions, too. Winnie was impressed. “She really knows each horse as an individual,” she says. “We talked about my goals and desires. She was listening more than I realized. At just about the conclusion of my visit, she said to me: ‘You know I have this gelding that I think would be perfect for you. I was going to keep him, but with all my babies I won't have as much time as I hoped. Would you like to see him, too?’ So to be polite, I said yes, but I was really thinking about the baby that I just knew was going to come



Camas Mist Snips June (Ragtime Dun D x Sable Nightingale) 2012 grulla mare, and Natalie, from their winter 2017 Victorian photo shoot (photo by Lou Ann Gaskell).

COLORFUL ~ DOING HER HOMEWORK

home with me. Nonetheless, off we went to see Teton Red Hawk ['Gabe']. He was six years old with only 30 days training as a four-year-old, and he's my least favorite color, red. I almost turned around, but Natalie said, 'I'll take him into the round pen so you can visit and see him move.' Well, I watched him move, I think, wow that's awesome! Then I interact with him and now I really am impressed with his try, his softness, and he really is beautiful! By now, I'm thinking maybe red isn't so bad. What I didn't admit but was pretty obvious to all was the connection this red horse and I had. But Natalie in all her wisdom knew. She listened and had paired me with just the right partner."

"I will be ever grateful to Natalie. She may not know what a wonderful thing

she did or how much Teton Red Hawk, a stunning red horse, adds to my life. He has been a pleasure and wonderful partner to start my new journey with. I know that I am not the only person that Natalie has touched with her horses and amazing breeding program. You know, I just bought one horse and what makes this woman even more incredible is that she finds time to stay in touch and be supportive in my horse endeavors. Yes, she is absolutely passionate about the Morgan breed."

MORGAN EXPOSURE

There are not many local showing options in the area, but that has not stopped Natalie from promoting Morgans in several other unique ways. "I have been a member of the Jackson Hole Police Department's

Citizens Mounted Unit for several years," she explains. "Jackson sees over a million visitors every summer, and the up-close interaction with people is a great way to have them meet a Morgan. We do several parades a season as well as crowd control at concerts, rodeos, and other events. I will be certifying a new grulla mare this season, and I'm excited to show people additional colors of Morgans."

With access to some of the most scenic trails in the nation, Natalie's favorite thing to do on a summer day is to go for a trail ride. She has also done competitive trail riding. Her first time out on her gelding TRW Skyjac saw the pair taking fourth in a large class of 60 horses, representing the breed in fine style. "I love when people approach us and say, 'that has to be a Morgan!'" she says.

While looking through Pinterest one day, Natalie spotted some beautiful photographs of women with their horses in the snow. She thought it would be a great idea to do something similar using her Morgans. The photos would certainly grab attention in advertisements, on social media, and on her website. The first series of photographs featured the mares of Mountain Home Morgans and had a Victorian theme. The costumes were rented from the BYU Idaho Theatre department. Friend and client Lou Ann Gaskell came to visit, helped ready the horses and took the photographs. Some of them accompany this article; another shoot is planned to use the stallions. "It's fun to play dress up," Natalie says. "Some Wild West ones would be a blast!"

Natalie's future plans include continuing to find creative ways to promote the Morgan breed. She would love to see one of her silver or dun babies at OKC in the future. But her number one goal is to create more converts to Morgans. "I think we need to reach beyond the Morgan world to market our horses," Natalie says. "Once a person owns and bonds with a Morgan, the deal is cemented. A lifelong love affair begins. I am a compulsive match maker, and the fit of horse and buyer is very sacred to me. My objective is always to keep the money in the Morgan breed, and I am happy to help people find their Morgan, even if it isn't one of mine." ■

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