

LOCAL NEWS

Definitive Whim

How Hayley Sumner of Berkshire HorseWorks left Hollywood's glamour behind and became an equine therapist in the Berkshires

By Albert Stern / BJV Editor

If there is a linear career path to becoming an equine therapy practitioner, Hayley Sumner does not seem to have taken it, though when she tells her story, somehow everything fits.

This self-described "nice New York Jewish girl" is the founder and director of Berkshire HorseWorks in Richmond, a nonprofit organization that since 2013 has offered workshops and programs designed to work out human issues from workaday corporate team building to severe emotional trauma through interactions with horses.

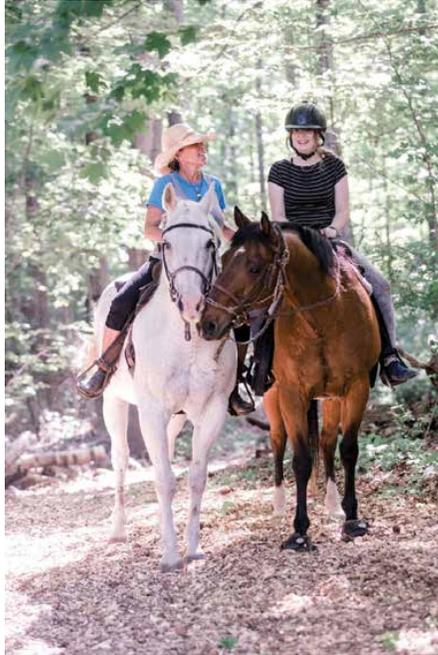
The serene hillside ranch sited on seven bucolic acres where these human/equine psychodramas play out is worlds away from the psychodramas that Sumner left behind with her early career in the fast-paced, high-stakes, and often cutthroat world of public relations. While still in her 20s, Sumner rose to its heights, first as an executive at the influential Howard J. Rubenstein Associates and then partnering with Dan Klores to start what is now DKC, one of the powerhouse PR firms in the United States. Sumner served as president of the firm's entertainment division and opened its West Coast office. "My niche was really big entertainment companies with top leaders," she says, "and then I did a lot of worldwide events."

Her clients included Howard Stern, Gary Shandling, Sony, Ronald Perlman, the William Morris Agency, Harvey Weinstein, Donald Trump (she worked on the opening of Mar-a-Lago after he turned the iconic Palm Beach estate into a resort), and also the Dalai Lama ("If you put in Trump and Harvey Weinstein, you gotta put in the Dalai Lama," says Sumner – she did the PR on two of his books and met him twice). Sumner recounts that she ran publicity for the Woodstock festivals in 1994 and 1999, and worked on high-profile events like Revlon's Fire & Ice balls, the MTV and VH1 award ceremonies, and even the Oscars.

Along with Klores, she was among Jay Leno's trusted confidantes as he vied with David Letterman for *The Tonight Show* job in the early 1990s, a showbiz saga chronicled in Bill Carter's *The Late Shift*.

"In addition to the corporate communications and PR," Sumner says, "I did a lot of crisis management, as you can tell with who my clients were back then."

Nevertheless, she "was never really at home. I loved the corporate work but was never really a red carpet publicist person." She better enjoyed



Hayley Sumner (left) riding her horse, Spirit, at the Berkshire HorseWorks ranch in Richmond

signing new clients, pursuing large and emerging businesses in the technology and medical sectors as those industries got hot. However, "My heart was always in the nonprofit world, so we would do a lot of pro bono work. I did NYU Medical Center's division of

pediatric neurosurgery, Rock the Vote, Save the Children, the Make a Wish Foundation."

Sumner's relationship with Dan Klores was bumpy. The two had a "very intense falling out...that was in all the papers" that led her to found her own eponymous company in the early aughts, consulting and also pursuing an entrepreneurial venture, Pooch Pants USA, which made a line of pants for dog owners equipped with treats, toys, and a water bowl. She lived then on the ocean in the Topanga Canyon section of Los Angeles County, a rugged and scenic bohemian enclave (the upscale kind) on the edge of the Santa Monica Mountains, "and one day just said, I couldn't do it," she remembers. "I love the ocean and loved all of that about California and then I was done." She broke up with a boyfriend with whom she was building a house, purchased a big recreational vehicle, and with her dog Brando, a 125-pound rottweiler that was also a therapy dog, "started driving cross country in the RV, trying to think of what I wanted to do, if I didn't want to be in PR in LA."

"What it is that really gets me going in the morning, and my motto in life, is 'definitive whim.' Like, have playfulness in your life – definitive whim. Yeah, have playful light. Playfulness. Explore. Frolic. But make decisions – don't waffle." And thus, Sumner set out on the winding journey east in a large recreational vehicle, with a stop to work with Brando on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana, a state she says "is my soul." This cross-country trek would eventually lead her to the Berkshires, where she had gone to Camp Taconic in Hinsdale.

Sumner's parents divorced when she was six – she recalls that her mother, a textile designer, vacationed at the beach, while her father, a school principal, preferred the mountains. In the Bronx, her father took her on pony rides in Van Cortlandt Park, and in the Berkshires, he took her to auctions, letting her hold the bidding paddle, "so I would just, you know, get that thing in your stomach." Those experiences, she recounts, prepared her for her first professional involvement with horses.

"I wound up in Kentucky," Sumner says. "Mind you, I'm on heartbreak from the breakup. I have my rottweiler therapy dog and I get to this horse auction. I've been on the road for five months and I was still consulting with a PR firm, and I drove up to valet parking and they're looking at me like I'm insane. I go inside, and for the next two days, I was listening and watching people who are bidding on horses and how they were picking them and what makes sense."

"I'm like, 'Oh, I can buy Kentucky-bred babies and flip them in Southern California.' I didn't know that was called pinhooking – a sleazy business, right, but I didn't know that – and I think, 'Oh, that's an entrepreneurial way to get into a different business

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and still stay where there's beaches and happiness.' So, I was looking and looking in the paddocks and listening to the sheikh of Dubai, the sultan of this, all of these people who were there, and I saw this little six-month-old yearling. And she was a Storm Cat baby, one of his last babies. (*Storm Cat was of one of the horse racing's all-time leading sires – Ed.*) The auction numbers weren't moving really quickly and she wasn't the prettiest, but she really looked smart."

Sumner decided to buy the young horse and moved to Kentucky to learn about the racing business, living at first in worker's quarters on a sprawling rustic cattle farm. "I call my mom, my nice Jewish mother," Sumner remembers. "She's like, 'You're out of your mind,' and slams the phone down on me." She broke in by walking one-year-old horses at a horse farm, the only "little Jewish girl from New York" doing a job performed mostly by Mexican men "who didn't know I could speak Spanish" and who tested her by giving her the hardest to manage animals. It allowed her to bond with her own horse, which she named Definitive Whim.

In Kentucky, she started equine therapy work as a volunteer for Central Kentucky Riding for Hope, and that's where she first learned about the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EGALA). The group helps people with mental health and behavioral challenges. Sumner says she got certified in EGALA therapy for her own personal growth and because she thought Definitive Whim might want to be a therapy horse.

But Definitive Whim's Storm Cat genes came to the fore, and she "wound up racing," Sumner says. "She ran with crazy abandon...like a wild woman." Before a race, Sumner would call her nonagenarian grandmother and centenarian aunt, and put the phone to the horse's ear as the two matrons loudly exhorted her to victory. Sumner would sneak Brando the dog into the paddock to kiss Definitive Whim before a race and play her the singer Akon's song 'Beautiful' ("I see you in the club, you showin' thug love") to psych her up. All to good effect – Sumner says the horse finished on the board (1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th) in 75 percent of her races.

"So I'm thinking this is a great way to make a living," she says, "and I'm volunteering with horses." Additionally, Sumner was pursuing a master's degree in social work and working to support Barack Obama's first campaign for president by putting stickers all over, which was not much appreciated in the deeply-red Bluegrass State.

But her Kentucky idyll was not to last. An injection was incorrectly administered to Definitive Whim after a race, and the horse had to be put down, leaving Sumner devastated. "I really had to get out of Kentucky. My heart was broken. And I realized that I didn't want to be a mental health professional. I'm an entrepreneur, and I like the bigger picture. So I knew that becoming a social worker or psychologist wasn't going to fulfill the purpose that I felt I was put here for."

After plans to start an equine therapy ranch in Montana didn't pan out, Sumner moved to the Berkshires, where her father had settled and which



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she fondly remembered from her days as a camper. "But as soon as I moved here, I got breast cancer," she says. "And then my dog Brando got cancer. And my stepsister got diagnosed and her husband, all in nine days, totally random. So that was a game-changer for me. At the time, I would never even acknowledge that I had breast cancer because I didn't want to be known as one of 'those people' and have people in a new community treating me like that. I was so focused on getting my dog healthy. So Brando was going through chemo. I was going through radiation, we were going down to New York City for five days at a time. So I said, 'What am I going to do? Here I went through the three surgeries, five weeks of radiation, and went through all the chemo with my dog. I lost my stepsister because her cancer spread. And I said, 'I got to finally do what my heart has been calling me to do.'"

She made the acquaintance of Carl Dunham, then the owner of the Berkshire Equestrian Center in Richmond, who supported her ambitions by letting her use the farm's training facility. Kismet soon struck again when her hairdresser told her about a rescue horse that was available for adoption. Sumner was smitten by the five-year-old blue-eyed "medicine hat" horse (a mostly white horse with a

colored patch on its head) – "the most mystical of horses for the Blackfeet Indians," she says – named Spirit, who originally came from Montana.

Everything about Spirit spoke to her, she says, but it took the horse three weeks to warm to her. "I would put a chair in the field, and every other horse would come up to me except that one. And that took patience. Patience is not necessarily my virtue and I work on it every day." Eventually, Spirit came around and Berkshire HorseWorks was started in 2013.

Sumner explains that equine therapy is predicated on the ideas of cognitive behavioral therapy. "It's solution-focused and strength-based, which means we believe that clients have the answers if given the space to solve a problem themselves." The client referred by a mental health professional may have a clinical diagnosis and a therapeutic goal, while corporate clients may be looking for team-building experiences or ways to boost their employees' sense of empowerment or decision making. She adds that herds of horses are naturally hierarchical. There are parallels with the social hierarchies in the business world – "who is the alpha, who speaks, who makes decisions is all in their body language. So it's a safe way for companies to address what's going

on" with their dynamics because they're doing it through horses. "A lot of the process is that horses become the metaphors for things that are happening in their lives."

Horses are naturally wary prey animals, explains Sumner, and for horses "everything is about observation and perception. When people think animal therapy, [they think] oh it's just like dogs. It's not. Dogs want to please you; they will do anything to please you. Horses will not even come close to you if they don't trust you. They are highly intuitive; they need to know if they can trust you or not in that moment. So, they are mirrors to the body, to what's happening inside us. So if there's an incongruity in what the client is saying and doing, in their verbal and nonverbal [actions] that horse is going to call you out."

Berkshire HorseWorks, organized as a nonprofit, has provided programs for a host of local businesses and community groups and has recently hosted workshops for healthcare workers stressed out during the coronavirus pandemic. Ultimately, Sumner wants to add complementary offerings at the ranch, and is working hard to develop the facility further. "Everything touches everyone here," says Sumner about the Berkshires, "and everyone is so passionate about things. There are so

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many generations and my hope is that it will be like an intergenerational therapeutic camp, that people don't look at as a place only for psychotherapy. We're trying now to collaborate with different practitioners, and that's to help financially sustain us through, but also, I think it was really in my business goal to be more well-rounded that way."

That work, and the effort involved in running a horse farm generally, are labor-intensive and unrelenting, but Sumner and her staff are persevering through this time of pandemic and looking forward to the future.

"I don't know how else to explain it. I love it. If I had five seconds, you'd see how exhausted I am. If I had five seconds to actually sit and appreciate and breathe, which is challenging when you're a single person in this environment. There's a s***load of work."

For more information on Berkshire HorseWorks, visit berkshirehorseworks.com, or call (413) 698-3700. Berkshire HorseWorks is at 101 Patton Road in Richmond.



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