

Studying Natural Horsemanship with Gina Morro

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Horses sometimes act in seemingly inexplicable ways. It has always been my passion to not just ride horses, but to truly understand them, knowing their needs and motives. Lendon Gray and Dressage4Kids, through the Lendon Gray Scholarship, helped me grow in my knowledge of horses by allowing me to travel to Anderson, South Carolina, to work with equine behavior specialist and natural horsemanship trainer, Gina Morro. My time working with Gina helped further my understanding of horses' needs and what we as humans can do to fulfill these needs. This was especially important to me because I have a nervous horse, and the things I learned have given me new information and tools to make him feel safe and confident. Not only does this help my relationship with him, it will also help me succeed in dressage by understanding and fulfilling his needs so that we can work in partnership in the ring.

Of the things that I learned from Gina, the most important information she imparted was how critical it is that horses are not hungry or dehydrated when we ask them to perform for us. Hunger or thirst can make even the most unflappable horse nervous, reactive, and spooky from stress. Gina pointed out ways to make sure a horse is satisfied before riding. First, a hungry horse's abdomen will be tightened, as if it is sucking in its stomach. Next, a dehydrated horse will have more prominent ridges over the eyes and lines appearing on the skin over the ribs. If a horse does not have his hunger and thirst satiated before working, he is more likely to develop ulcers and will not be able to perform well from the distraction.

Another important thing I learned from Gina is that horses often have very good reasons for being nervous or scared. Horses' senses far surpass humans' abilities. A horse may have legitimate fears about going in a certain place or doing a certain task. As the rider, and the leader of the horse's "herd of

two”, it is the human’s responsibility to check for any reason the horse might be scared or distracted, understand the issue, and help the horse overcome the fear without force. For example, one of the days I was working with Gina, we were taking the horses for a trail ride. Neither horse wanted to enter the woods. Upon further investigation, we found that an enormous tree had recently fallen near the path. The horses had witnessed this even from their paddocks and were still worried about going near what they perceived to be dangerous. By dismounting and leading the horses through that area, they gained confidence both in going down that particular trail and in our abilities to lead them safely.

While it is important to acknowledge the horse’s needs and fears, Gina also made sure to emphasize that sometimes it is necessary to make sure the horse’s attention is on the handler and learn to simply ignore what it finds frightening. I learned several groundwork techniques to regain the horse’s attention, ranging from circling the horse on a line and making frequent changes of direction to working through the situation at liberty by making sure I was more interesting than anything else around the horse.

Throughout the two weeks I was with Gina, I also assisted her with work around her farm. For example, I helped with watering the horses when the pipes froze, fed the horses, and adjusted blankets. I also assisted in the therapeutic riding program that was run out of the farm. By doing this, I worked off my payment for the fees not covered by the Lendon Gray Scholarship, which paid for my airfare to South Carolina.

Working with Gina allowed me to further my understanding of the horse’s needs and fears. I learned that the horse’s physical needs of food and water must always be met before the rider can expect the horse to work well. I also learned that some of the horse’s fears are legitimate, and that, by calmly working through the issue, one can cement oneself as a trustworthy and competent leader in the

horse's eyes. Finally, I learned that, sometimes, the horse has to learn to ignore the stimulus bothering it and trust in the handler's abilities as the leader.