

2026 Christian Kennedy Scholarship Reflection:
Emalee Walker

I am incredibly grateful to have been a recipient of the Dressage4Kids Christian Kennedy Scholarship. Dressage4kids is an amazing organization that has helped so many aspiring young adults have opportunities to grow and learn that would not be likely. Without D4K, youth in dressage would hardly exist. This opportunity allowed me to spend time in Wellington, Florida, training in a high-performance environment that I would not have otherwise been able to access. During my time there, I trained weekly under the guidance of USEF Assistant Pathway Coach Olivia LaGoy-Weltz, as well as with FEI trainer/rider Emily Miles at the beginning of the season, and rider biomechanics physiotherapist Jessica Niles. Going into this experience, my goal was to further develop my riding, gain exposure to top-level training, and continue progressing my horse toward FEI.

There were many impactful aspects of my winter training, but one of the most meaningful was the opportunity to scribe at the Adequan Global Dressage Festival. Sitting alongside some of the industry's leading judges gave me a completely new perspective on how rides are evaluated, from Training Level through Grand Prix. I was able to see firsthand how the training scale is reflected in each test, and how judges prioritize correctness, consistency, and quality basics in every movement.

Global is a unique environment where the highest levels of the sport exist alongside everyday riders working toward their own goals. In one ring, top athletes are preparing for upcoming CDIs, while in another, riders are striving to qualify for regional championships. Everywhere you look, there is talent—not only in the riders, but in the horses as well. It was inspiring to witness the pipeline of future champions, from young horse classes to potential team horses, alongside riders steadily developing and pursuing their own competitive goals.

This experience deepened my understanding of why judges score the way they do and helped me connect what we practice at home to what ultimately shows up in the ring. One judge shared something that has truly stayed with me: “Always be careful what you teach at home or how you handle situations, because it will always show up in the show ring.” That insight has shifted how I approach my daily training, making me more intentional, detail-oriented, and focused on building correct habits from the ground up.

Another major takeaway from this experience—reinforced both by the judges' perspective and my time training under Olivia LaGoy-Weltz—was the importance of developing an independent seat. Olivia consistently emphasized that you must fix the

rider first, then the horse, regardless of the level. If a rider relies too heavily on the saddle, the reins, or any one aid, it directly affects the horse more than we often realize. Having knowledgeable eyes on the ground to help improve my position not only made me a more effective rider, but also allowed my horse to move more freely and correctly. I learned how to be better for him so we can work more harmoniously as a team.

Physiotherapist Jessica Niles further reinforced the importance of rider biomechanics. Being treated by her through hands-on muscle release, exercises, and dry needling, as well as observing her teach riders at our barn, was eye-opening. It highlighted how all riders “have their things,” just like horses—we each have stronger and weaker sides, areas of tightness, and physical limitations that affect our riding.

There are moments when I hear corrections such as “use your knees more,” “open your knees,” “pull your shoulders back,” or “keep your elbows by your side.” While all of us feel we are doing these things to the best of our ability, I’ve learned that there is often a physical blockage in the body—such as tight muscles or patterns that haven’t been properly trained to release—that needs to be addressed in order to perform these aids correctly without strain. Depending on where we tend to compensate as riders, addressing these patterns is essential. Improving these areas not only enhances our position in the saddle, but also translates to better posture in daily life. Jessica’s approach was incredibly impactful, as she helped both myself and other riders become more effective by increasing awareness of and addressing these underlying issues in our bodies, both on and off the horse.

This area of health is a strong personal interest of mine, as I am considering pursuing a career in physiotherapy. Being able to speak with Jessica about her path and how she integrates her passion for physiotherapy with her career as a competitive FEI rider has been incredibly inspiring and has further fueled my motivation to explore this field.

Lastly, I learned the importance of balancing our mindset as riders through lessons with Emily Miles. It is easy to let perfectionist tendencies take over and feel like every ride needs to be “good,” or that our horses should feel perfect all the time. While that intention comes from a positive place, I learned not to let it become overwhelming. A quote Emily shared with me that has stayed with me is, “Don’t let perfection be the enemy of progress.” Being a thoughtful and empathetic rider sometimes means accepting where your horse is that day and trusting that, with consistency, things will improve.

Overall, this experience taught me how to be a better rider, teacher and student. I return home with both a full heart and a motivated mindset, excited to apply what I’ve learned and share it with others who are just as passionate about the sport.

I cannot thank the Dressage4Kids program and everyone behind it—especially Mary Livernois, Fern Feldman, Lendon Gray, and Anne Baber Wallis—enough for making this opportunity possible and for their support throughout the process. It was truly an honor to represent Christian's name and legacy. This opportunity would not have been possible without the generosity of donors who invest their time and resources into riders like me. It is humbling to have been given this chance and accept such kindness.

I am also deeply grateful to Olivia, Emily, and Jessica for the time and knowledge they invested in helping my horse, Wingman, and me become better athletes.

Sincerely,
Emalee Walker