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Samantha LeTourneau, Olivia Caspers and Lauren LeTourneau at Windy Ridge Ranch.
Photo by Emily J. Davis

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Olivia Caspers enjoys riding and spending time with Remy, one of Windy Ridge Ranch's schooling horses.

PHOTO BY EMILY J. DAVIS

EDITOR'S NOTE

I CONTINUE TO DISCOVER MORE TO LOVE ABOUT WOODBURY. After living here for 25 years and driving past the sign on Manning Avenue hundreds of times, I finally took the time to check out Windy Ridge Ranch.

My inspiration came after talking with local resident Todd Wildenauer, whose daughter takes riding lessons at the ranch. Todd shared that Linzie, a horse lover who aspires to become a veterinarian, thoroughly enjoys her time at the ranch, where she learns training and riding techniques as well as correct riding etiquette, careful horse handling and fun facts about these amazing animals. I decided I had to check it out.

I visited Windy Ridge on a warm summer day and was immediately impressed by the splendor of the land and the beautiful, friendly horses that are lucky to call this place home. But what struck me the most was the tireless dedication of Mark Ward, the founder, and his wife, Katie Clapp, who work hard taking care of their schooling herd and providing a top-notch riding experience for the thousands of students who have taken the reins.

Windy Ridge Ranch is a true gem in our community. And while development is creeping close to the ranch, Mark says its future is ensured through 2030, as the land is deemed urban reserve until then. Learn more about this unique Woodbury asset on page 16.



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Olivia Caspers and Remy, a Kentucky mountain horse.

By DEBBIE MUSSER
Photos by EMILY J. DAVIS



*Horseback riding is the name of the game at
Windy Ridge Ranch. Woodbury's unique lesson stable.*

Back in 1979, when development was starting to spread through the western edge of Woodbury, Mark Ward purchased a beautiful parcel of land across town on the city's eastern border with Afton. What started there as a horse hobby has grown into Windy Ridge Ranch, where thousands of students have honed their riding skills and learned an appreciation for a herd of happy, friendly, hardworking and well-loved horses.





Mark Ward and Katie Clapp of Windy Ridge Ranch, which offers a wall of saddles for riders—and so much more—on its picturesque pastures on the eastern edge of Woodbury.

The gate opens, and a herd of beautiful horses knows the routine. They move quickly and gracefully into the green pasture of summer, through the rolling hills of the ranch as a refreshing breeze blows.

Nestled on 22.7 acres off Manning Avenue on Woodbury's eastern border, Windy Ridge Ranch is located on one of the most picturesque—and windy—spots in the city. "It can be breezy in other places in Woodbury, but it's windy here," says Katie Clapp, who owns and operates the ranch with her husband, Mark Ward. "This is the ridge that separates the Mississippi and St. Croix River watersheds, and it's a windy ridge."

Windy Ridge Ranch has been a part of our community since 1979, when Ward bought the parcel of farmland, which was being used for raising sheepdogs. "I had grown up riding horses and taking lessons, and this was my hobby," says Ward, at that time a graduate student at the University of Minnesota's Philosophy of Science Center studying metaphysics, as well as an instructor in the U's honors division, teaching epistemology. "With eight horses, four of my own and four of my boarders, I started teaching a variety

of community education classes as well as riding lessons to pay for graduate school, and soon this was taking all my energy. The dissertation is still in a box," says Clapp with a smile.

Today the Windy Ridge herd, numbering 49 schooling horses, is used for the ranch's year-round lesson program, with horses available for lease (shared riding time). None of the horses is for sale. "This is unique," says Ward. "Most places like this will buy, sell and board horses. We are a lesson stable. That's our focus. Most of our horses spend their entire lives here and are excellent schooling horses with years of experience in equitation disciplines such as dressage, jumping, Western games, drill team, trails and parades."

As I walk through the ranch, Ward points out the pastures, woods, indoor riding arena, the "horsey hotel" (with hay storage and "lean-tos" which give the horses protection from the wind) and two outdoor arenas including "the big ring" measuring 135 feet by 270 feet, site of the jumping classes. "Ours is a plain, simple facility that's heavily used," says Ward. "But the pride of our ranch is our herd of schooling horses. This is a stable herd that lives together," he says as two horses approach me to say hello. "They're happy, friendly, hardworking, well-trained and well-loved."

"The horses are so valuable to our les-

son program," says Clapp. "They have to be patient with a variety of riders. We average 200 students per six-week session and have served over 2,000 students over the years. Our horses are of various breeds including quarter horses, warmbloods, paints, thoroughbreds, Arabians, appaloosa and Kentucky mountain horses. We have one retired horse, Filly, who's now 29 years old and blind; she's the mom of some of our other horses."

Olivia Caspers, 12, a seventh-grader at St. Ambrose of Woodbury Catholic School who's been riding at Windy Ridge for five years, leases a Kentucky mountain horse, Remy. "He's the greatest horse you'll ever meet and he's always ready to try something new, which I really like," says Caspers. "I ride year-round and the horse's behavior is so different in each of the four seasons."

The ratio of girls/women to boys/men taking riding lessons at Windy Ridge is 80/20 according to Ward. "Horseback riding is one sport where men and women compete as equals; it doesn't take brute strength, it takes skill and finesse," he says. "You really feel the sheer wonder of a horse when you're running up hills or jumping."

A junior beginner, 10-year-old Nate Haas, a Liberty Ridge Elementary School fifth-grader, rides Racer, a cross between a paint and an appaloosa, whose great-grand sire was none other than the famous thoroughbred racehorse Secretariat. "He likes to eat grass—a lot of grass," says Haas. "I really enjoy horse

riding, and Mark is a very good teacher. At the end of the class he lets us ask him questions about the horses, and I learn about them that way.”

Ward and Clapp both take riding lessons themselves twice a week and bring that knowledge to their students. And since riding can be a dangerous sport, “our safety measures have improved dramatically over the years,” says Clapp. “Mark was one of the first instructors to require helmets, and our Western drill team is the only team that wears them. Our helmet philosophy is every time, every ride.”

Woodbury sisters Samantha and Lauren LeTourneau both ride at Windy Ridge. Samantha, 12, an Oak-Land Junior High seventh-grader, takes a weekly lesson and rides on the Junior Equestrian Drill Team (JETs) which practices on Sundays. Lauren, 15, a Stillwater High School sophomore, has ridden for seven years and goes to the ranch three to four times per week for lessons and participation in the Valley Shamrocks 4-H Club and Windy Ridge Riders Horse Club. “My favorite is the club overnights where we play games and eat great food,” she says. “I love that everyone at Windy Ridge knows each other and we all have so many new friends. It’s like a second family.”

“We really do have an amazing, wonderful community of students,” says Clapp. “They’re great kids, and it is fun watching them grow. A lot of parents tell us that riding a horse has been the best thing for their children, that it’s made a difference in their lives. A few of our students have gone on to become veterinarians.”

Lessons at Windy Ridge are divided by age: 7–8-year-olds (pee wee), 9–11-year-olds (junior beginner) and 12 through adult (beginner, advanced beginner, intermediate/advanced). “Our oldest student is 73—he’s been here for 25 years—and he was just in his very first horse show,” says Clapp. “Our students come from Woodbury, Afton, Hastings and across the metro area.”

Helen Krone, 41, a resident of Bloomington, has been riding at Windy Ridge since 2005. “Between taking lessons, riding on the Windy Ridge Riders Drill Team and personal riding time, I’m at the ranch three to four times



Life is busy at the ranch, managing a herd of 49 horses and around 200 students, including (below right) Samantha LeTourneau on Cody, Olivia Caspers with Remy and Lauren LeTourneau on Bobaloosa.



per week which is pretty good, considering I have a 40-minute drive time each way," says Krone. "I started riding in my 30s and was concerned that there would only be young teenage girls in class with me. I was pleasantly surprised to find riders of all ages at the ranch."

Krone leases Zip (Zippity-Do-Dah), a 28-year-old bay gelding which is an appendix quarter horse, a cross between a thoroughbred and a quarter horse.

"Now some people would call a 28-year-old horse a lawn ornament, but that couldn't be further from the truth,"

Krone says. "Zip is the perfect name for my spunky, zippy horse that can still get up and go, sometimes faster than horses 10 years his junior. We've gone on trail rides, camping, done the drill team and won ribbons at the Windy Ridge Riders Horse Club shows. He's my horsie true love and childhood dream come true!"

After many years of riding, Ward feels the same about horses. "I ride in all of my classes because it's still a thrill for me," he says. "Lessons are a fun way of exercising and everyone can always learn more and refine their skills. And horses are so interesting. These are animals that are very friendly but you can ride them too. Our lesson stable, Windy Ridge Ranch, is a small business: it's all we do. And it's a fun business." //

Windy Ridge Ranch Lessons

Group lessons may include English or Western equitation, working safely with horses, proper grooming and tacking, and practical aspects of horse husbandry and equine science. Classes are pee wee, junior beginner, advanced beginner, intermediate/advanced, dressage and jumping.
windyridgeranch.com

Horse Club and 4H

The Windy Ridge Riders Horse Club sponsors horse and schooling shows, a drill team, a junior equestrian team (the JETs), county and Minnesota State Fair competitions, parade performances, overnight horse camping weekends, a fall barn dance and more. The club is open to all local horse enthusiasts. The ranch also hosts the Valley Shamrocks 4H Club.
wrrhc.org