

# the healing horse

With the help of a powerful, four-legged creature named Jake, Kacey Cramer learned to control the anorexia that threatened her life. **BY JAC CHEBATORIS**

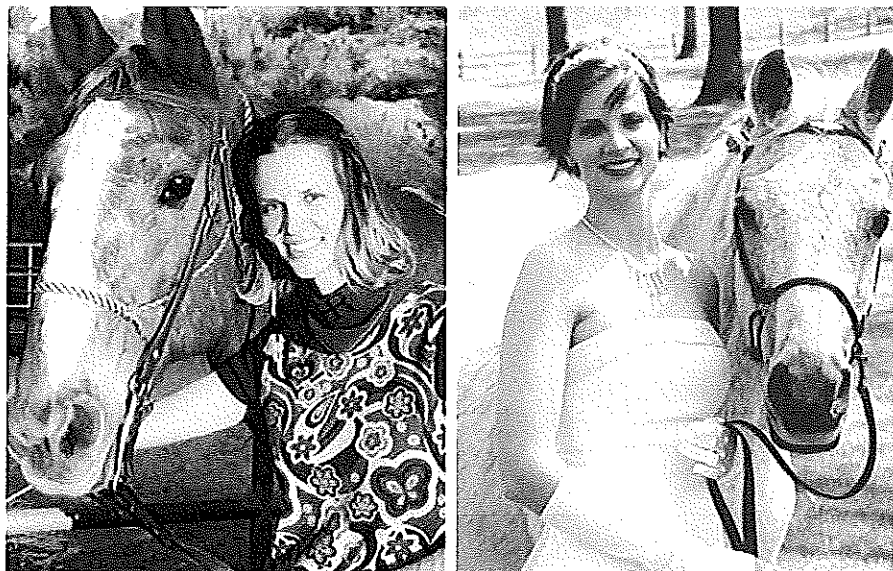
**WHEN KACEY PARLATORE** got married to Michael Cramer in an outdoor ceremony four years ago, she rode up the aisle on horseback. Her mount, Masada, also carried the ring, on a pillow tied around his chest. Everyone present understood how important it was to have Masada play a part in the proceedings. After all, a horse had helped save Kacey's life.

Kacey, now 35, had spent years suffering from anorexia that, unchecked, could have killed her. Michael and her parents had pleaded with her to get help, but nothing had worked. Bright and ambitious, she had earned her master's degree in art history and was on a teaching assignment in Peru when, severely dehydrated and emaciated from the

disease, she collapsed and returned home to Asheville, North Carolina. She immediately checked herself into a hospital, where at first the doctors thought her extreme weight loss was due to parasites picked up from her travels. It wasn't. Stripped of fat and muscle, with her heart literally shrinking, the 29-year-old's body had begun to shut down.

Five months after her release from the hospital, in December 2002, Kacey was on a plane to the treatment center that a friend had recommended. Remuda Ranch in Wickenburg, Arizona, is an inpatient program that uses equine therapy along with other methods to help women and girls with eating and anxiety disorders (boys are treated at a

**Kacey Cramer and her steadfast companion, Captain.**



Kacey with Jake at Remuda Ranch (left) and on her wedding day with Masada, her unusual ring bearer.

**“Recovery is an ongoing process; by continuing to make healthy choices, I find that it gets easier.”**

nearby facility). Here, far from home and family, Kacey confronted the illness that had consumed her life for so long.

Founded in 1990, Remuda offers a combination of traditional and not-so-traditional therapies. “The sessions with horses are one of our most requested therapeutic activities,” says Amy Gerberry, a director of administrative services. Why horses? There is increasing awareness in the field of animal-assisted therapy that horses are effective in helping people tune in to their emotions. “They read our non-verbal messages and give information about us that we’re not as good at picking up,” says Lynn Thomas, executive director of the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association.

That was exactly what Kacey needed to deal with her eating problems, which had begun in adolescence. Convinced that she was responsible for her parents’ breakup (they divorced when she was

3), and feeling rejected by her classmates at the private school she attended on scholarship (“I didn’t wear the right brands”), she started cutting back on calories at 14. “It escalated to where I wouldn’t eat at all when I was on campus,” says Kacey. She began thinking, “If I control how many calories I put into my body, I can handle going through my life today.” And that seemed to work for her—until, in 2002, the damage to her body was finally too severe to ignore.

When Kacey arrived at Remuda, she was too weak to join in the equine program. “I was maxed out,” she says, recalling how utterly exhausted she felt, not just physically but emotionally. Determined not to cause her family and Michael any more pain, she was ready to do whatever the doctors asked. For the first month, she was given only half portions to eat because of the anxiety attacks she suffered from having to consume solid food. To make sure

Kacey got all the calories she needed to gain weight safely, the staff inserted a feeding tube through her nose.

Soon Kacey settled into a routine. Every morning she would get weighed and have breakfast, then go for group therapy and twice-a-week sessions with her individual therapist. Kacey was given medication, including drugs for anxiety, and her meals and snacks were supervised. There were regular appointments with the psychiatrist, a nutritionist and a doctor. And her afternoons were filled with art therapy, body-image classes or physical activities, like rope climbing, to instill a sense of achievement and self-esteem.

Two weeks after she arrived, Kacey was introduced to Jake, who would be her horse during her stay. The chestnut had been abused by male ranchers and was skittish around men and strangers who tried to touch his face, the staff warned Kacey. Jake was also known for being unmotivated; he’d rather stay put than move around. Even so, Kacey, who had ridden a horse only once before, was immediately drawn to the gentle, intuitive creature. During their first session together, she groomed him. After she’d finished, Kacey walked away to return the bucket to the tack room, and Jake turned his head to watch her. “He was paying attention to me; it made me feel special,” she remembers.

One day, after a severe anxiety attack, Kacey asked to see Jake. As she approached the pen, the horse walked over and put his head over the fence. It was a cathartic moment: Kacey wrapped her arms around the animal’s neck and began to weep. “I had such rejection and abandonment issues,” she says, “and here’s this horse saying, ‘I don’t think you’re too fat. I don’t think you’re ugly. I think you’re perfect just the way you are, and I’m not going to leave you.’”

From that day on, Kacey looked forward to her twice-a-week horse therapy, and responded so well that she was

## Changing Lives *connect*

granted extra equine sessions. During her time with Jake, Kacey got him to trot and canter and went on trail rides (she earned extra riding privileges if she ate all her meals and snacks).

Kacey also took part in equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) sessions. In EAP, a therapist and a horse specialist work with the patient and a trained horse on activities designed to build confidence and teach

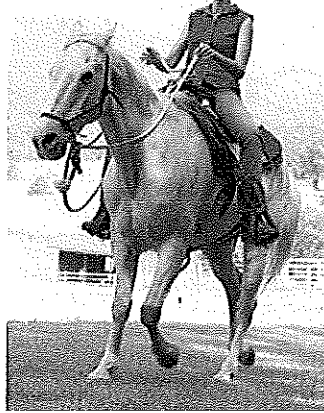
communication skills. As anyone who has ever stood next to a horse knows, they're large, intimidating creatures. The uneasiness they can cause offers an opportunity for learning, says Lynn Thomas: "How do you work with something that is too powerful for you to control?" Figure that out and you're on your way to figuring out how to manage your emotions.

It was during one of these sessions that Kacey faced another turning point. That day she was given the task of getting one of the activity horses, named Cruiser, over a jump without using a halter and without riding or otherwise touching him. No matter what she did, Kacey couldn't get the animal to do it. Then she had an idea: Could she put the pole on the ground? The therapist and horse specialist said yes. Kacey lowered the pole, but still Cruiser wouldn't go. Finally she realized that she had to ask for help (something she hadn't been able to do easily in the past). She asked the team for assistance, and the three of them, making noises and waving their arms, persuaded the horse to step over the pole.

This was an extraordinary moment for Kacey. If she could bypass old ways of thinking once, maybe she could do it again, in other ways. That evening she wrote in her journal: "This day has just exploded!"

Two months after arriving at the ranch, Kacey transferred to the center's transi-

Four years ago, Kacey adopted Captain.



tional program called Remuda Life, about 80 miles away. That meant being separated from Jake, but living in a house without round-the-clock supervision was important preparation for reentering the outside world. After another two months, during which she got to visit Jake one last time, Kacey returned home. She never saw Jake again. But a framed photo of the horse hangs on her bedroom wall.

Jake had not only helped save Kacey's life; he completely changed it. After returning to Asheville, she interned at an equine-therapy center and subsequently worked there as an equine specialist. Today she runs the horse program at a group home for behaviorally challenged kids. "For me, recovery is an ongoing process," she says. "By continuing to make healthy choices, I find that it gets easier."

Two years after leaving Remuda and four months after her wedding, Kacey decided it was time to get a horse of her own. In 2005 she adopted Captain, a white Appaloosa with gold spots. Last fall her horse was diagnosed with bone cancer in his jaw. (Fortunately the cancer is slow-growing and he isn't in pain.) In the years before Jake, such upsetting news might have set off Kacey's anorexia. But today she's stronger and more resourceful—and she is cherishing the time she has with Captain, who reminds her every day of the lessons she learned from Jake. "I don't take anything for granted," says Kacey. "And I'll never give up on Captain."

*Jac Chebatoris, formerly at Newsweek, writes for various publications and Web sites.*



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