

Stephanie and Chris Brannan

Making Everyone Feel At Home At

WINGSWEPT FARM

By Erica Faulkner

They do it all.

They start young horses, sell finished show horses, pair amateurs and junior exhibitors with competition quality horses, and give an astounding number of lessons each week. In 2015, they were awarded the Tony Ray Young Trainers Award, highlighting their achievements as a young couple in the show horse industry. A true asset to the show horse community, Stephanie and Chris Brannan exhibit talent far beyond their years, and it is only just the beginning for this young couple.

Stephanie's history with horses is long and detailed. Born in New Jersey, but spending most of her young life in New York, she was raised on a standardbred farm. "My mother always had horses," said Stephanie.

The farm often had 300 horses on it at a time. "We stood 11 stallions, had an extensive breeding program, it was my mother's life," she said.

Stephanie, the youngest child of the family, with two sisters and a brother, happened to be the one that caught the horse bug full on. "I grew up riding everything you could think of. Western, three-day-eventing, jumping, hunt seat. You name it I did it." Although acquiring most of her love of horses from her mother, Stephanie is quick to add that her father has been a positive influence in her love for the industry.

"My dad was involved with my sisters and their riding when they were young," she said. "But I think he might have thought it was just going to be a phase for me." As it turned out, Stephanie's love for all things horses was far from a phase. "My dad is very supportive of the life I have chosen, and he has stepped in many times to offer his guidance and encouragement of my profession."

Stephanie started out showing Morgan horses, eventually making the switch to Saddlebred's when she started to ride equitation with the famed Sally Lindabury, owner and trainer of Reindance Stables in New York. Stephanie fell in love with learning horsemanship, the basis of equitation. She eventually went on to also learn from Jan Lukens of Lukens Stables, and Nealia McCracken of North Wind Stables.

"She was a very good student," Lukens said about her former equitation student. "Her mother used to bring her over for her lessons. You could just tell that she was going to be a great one, she worked so hard."

Stephanie's experience extends farther than the Standardbred and Saddlebred industries, she also got her hands wet with race horses at one point in time. For about three years, she spent time at the racetrack, galloping and starting race horses for Mrs. DuPont. However, her love for the Saddlebred could not be denied, and it was in 2004 that Stephanie made the move to Kentucky to pursue her passion.

"A great friend of mine (and now customer) Anna Johnson, had heard that Bill and Nancy Becker of Shadow Run Farm were hiring," said Stephanie. "She told me I needed to interview with them." Over the years, Stephanie had developed a rapport with the Beckers and even stayed with them when she was in town for the thoroughbred sales.

"I was in town for a sale, and I took my friend's advice and set up an interview," said Stephanie. The Beckers knew right away that she was exactly what they were looking for. "I finished attending the September Kenneland sale, went home for one week to pack my things, and moved to Kentucky to work for Shadow Run," said Stephanie.



Chris and Stephanie Brannan, owners and trainers at Wingswept Farm where everyone is welcome, from the budding beginner to the world champion competitor.

Chris Brannan also grew up with horses in his life. As a young boy living in Richmond, Virginia, he spent his days with his grandfather, Buddy Waller, showing road horses and road ponies.

"Chris's grandfather was really talented with a horse," Stephanie said. And it is evident by the horses that Chris turns out today, that he acquired this talent as well.

"My grandfather was a kind of father figure to me," Chris said. "I wanted to be around horses, that's where I was most of the time. After I decided that I wanted to do horses for a living, I went to work for my distant cousin, Bill Waller."

Working for such industry greats as Bill Waller, Todd Graham, and Nelson Green, Chris was able to build on his natural talent over the years. However, his greatest length of time with another trainer was with Merrill Murray of Merlin Farm.

Murray speaks highly of his former employee and student.



Stephanie is not only talented at training and showing Saddlebreds. She grew up riding a variety of styles and is skilled at riding hunters and western horses as well.



Chris got his start with horses at an early age, showing road horses and ponies with his grandfather, Buddy Waller. He took the opportunity to ride at any chance he could get.

"He was just as good of a young man as I have ever had work for me." Murray continues, "He was so hard working, dedicated, he was with me for eight or nine years."

Attentive to detail, and the ability to remember anything and everything, Murray laughed as he pointed out, "You better not tell him anything wrong that's for sure. He never forgot anything you told him, so you best make sure you told him right!"

And Chris, speaks just as highly of his former employer.

"Merrill is meticulous about doing things correctly. He gave me the opportunity to work a bunch of young horses. He sets you up to do good things in several ways: he teaches you a lot and tells you how to go about your business and how to treat people. Merrill helps you throughout your life."

During his years at Merlin Farm, he helped develop such horses One Class Act, (winner of the

UPHA Five-Gaited Classic class at the Lexington Junior League Horse Show in 2011), Samur's Lady In Blue (ASR National Futurity Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Reserve Champion at the Kentucky State Fair in 2011), and CH Prom Dress.

Stephanie and Chris knew each other from years of showing on the same circuit, however, it was during the World's Championship Horse show one year that they started their relationship.

"We started dating, and that's the time that we both took jobs in Kentucky," said Stephanie. "He went to work for Merrill, and I went to work for the Beckers." The two farms sit close to one another, and thus made it easy for their already budding relationship to flourish.

"We actually dated for 10 years before we got married," Stephanie said. "We waited a long time because we had other priorities to take care of if we wanted our own stable."

Stephanie's father had a certain amount of funds set aside for Stephanie, and although the

initial thought was that this money would be used for her wedding, Stephanie had different plans. "My father said I could use the money for a wedding, or for a house. Of course, I used it for a house."

It was a smart decision for the young couple. "We had been renting an apartment, and we knew that if we wanted to have our own farm, that we were just throwing our money away paying rent."

Since they decided to purchase a home with some acreage, the wedding had to wait. However, when the two decided it was the right time to tie the knot, it was nothing short of perfection.

"We got married here on the farm," said Stephanie. The farm, which they moved into in 2013, is impressive. Fifty stalls in the main barn, tack room, offices, two arenas (one that's 50'x210' and one that's 40'x150'), a 10-stall lesson barn, and ample acreage, are just some of what Wingswept



Wingswept Farm always has a nice group of young horses at their farm. Samur's Cover Girl, one of the top walk-trot horses in the country today, got her start at Wingswept Farm. Here, Stephanie is seen winning the Two-Year-Old Three-Gaited Stake class at Shelbyville in 2014. This was the debut class for this mare.



Chris showed the big moving Roselane's Dancing For Dollars in 2013 for Merrill Murray and Merlin Farm. Here, he is seen winning the All-American Cup Three-Year-Old Sweepstakes.



Another young horse campaigned by Chris was the big moving gaited horse, One Class Act. Here they are seen winning the UPHA Five-Gaited Classic class at the 2011 Lexington Junior League.

Farm has to offer its clients. "We even have a colt/broodmare barn that we can remove the petitions from so that we can use it for a variety of purposes," said Stephanie.

The wedding was one to remember. "One of our customers is a minister, and she married us!" said Stephanie. "We took flowers left over from Louisville, you know, the ones that are left behind when everyone leaves, and we used those as our wedding flowers."

Stephanie showed her artistic side when she handmade her bridesmaid's bouquets from burlap and blue and green braiding ribbon (*the same colors that her student Alex Rudder had on her silks*). "It was perfect. All my kids (students) that had been riding with me for so long, they were all part of the wedding."

Since its opening, Wingswept Farm has quickly climbed to the top of the list for competitive show barns. With champions in all divisions, and at every top show in the country, Chris and Stephanie continue to impress their customers and peers.

Longtime friend and customer, David Rudder, is impressed each day with the atmosphere that his daughter Alex is part



Chris and Stephanie's pride and joy, son Hunter Brannan, is a smiling face both at the farm, and at the horse shows.

of. "It is very much a family atmosphere," said Rudder. "Alex Spends almost every day during the summer with Chris and Stephanie. They have always encouraged and taught her to learn about the training, care and what is involved with not just the show horses, but breeding stock too."

Rudder continues, "It has always been a good feeling knowing that Alex is not there to just learn how to ride and show, but she has learned and is continuing to learn, what the responsibilities are for the care and such that is related to having horses and a barn."

Alex Rudder has accumulated an impressive number of wins while riding under the direction of Chris and Stephanie, such as her first World Championship win with CH The Proof Is In The Heir (*Heirculies as he is known around the farm*), in 2014 when she won the Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited 13 and Under Div. 2 qualifier and the Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited 13 and Under Championship that year. She later went on to win the Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited 14-17 qualifier and Championship at Louisville in 2015 with Soquili's Curious George.

Alex recalls her first Louisville win in 2014 with CH The Proof Is In The Heir, and she comments, "that moment was one of my favorite memories with Chris and Stephanie ... Stephanie and Chris are two of the most hardworking people I have ever met, and they have taught me so much over the years. More than I can put into words."

Alex and her family are just some of the many customers of Wingswept Farm that sing their praise, as well as bring home



A shining example of Chris' talent with a young horse, I'm A Mystery is a junior three-gaited star owned by the Rudder Family.



Alex Rudder and Soquili's Curious George. This team has won several top titles under the Wingswept Farm name, and Rudder credits her success to the teamwork of Chris and Stephanie.

blue-ribbon honors. From academy riders, to world champion competitors, Chris and Stephanie instruct them all on an equal level.

Anna Johnson, friend and customer, recalls the first time she met Stephanie.

"I first met Stephanie at the Devon Horse Show when I had a pony with Chris Gantley, she was around 13 or 14," she said. "Here was this young girl with a long brunette pony tail and a faithful yellow dog by her side putting tail switches in for Chris."

And from there, their friendship blossomed. “Stephanie lived with my sister and I. Sydney (her yellow companion) potty trained our Corgi puppies, her horse Aquarian lived in the front pasture, and she had just started dating Chris, so he became a regular at our house as well! Stephanie and Chris are pretty much family to me!”

Johnson also credits the Brannans with her entry back into the show horse community after a decade hiatus. “After being out of the Saddlebred industry for so long, I decided to return and knew there were only two people that I trusted completely to find me a project show horse, Stephanie and Chris.”

Wingswept Farm is always bustling with activity. Not only do they produce great riders from their own lesson program, but Stephanie also heads up the lesson program at the University of Kentucky, supporting and growing their saddle seat team. “Chris really shines with the young horses,” said Johnson. “I am so proud to call them my trainers, my friends.”

Running a facility as large as Wingswept Farm takes a devoted team. With a good group of full-time — and some part time — employees, the Brannans work hard to provide the best atmosphere that they can for their customers.

Rudder speaks to their dedication to their farm. “Their ethics, dedication and passion is certainly something to admire,” Rudder said. “Additionally, their care and concern for their horses’ welfare is a primary objective and they have been instrumental in teaching those things to Alex. That is something that is very important to Marie and I.”

Karen Joly, who works part-time for Wingswept Farm, recalls what was the beginning of her correspondence with the Brannans.

“A friend introduced me to riding Saddlebreds by taking me to Bill and Nancy Becker’s Shadow Run Stables in the Fall of 2004,” she said. “For my second lesson, I was introduced to their new trainer (at the time), Stephanie Sedlacko. I was immediately impressed at her method of instruction, that I could easily understand what she wanted me to do, and at her encouragement when I tried. I remember telling my husband when I got home, ‘Wow. They have this new young instructor and I really like her style. I’m sticking with this place!’”

Joly has been with Stephanie and Chris ever since, taking lessons and working in the office. The greatest addition to the farm, however, is not that of a world champion horse, or of a long-time friend whose loyalty is tried and true. The greatest addition to Wingswept Farm, may be Hunter Brannan, Chris and Stephanie’s first child. The Brannans make sure that their son gets to be a part of the farm, and it is no surprise that he seems, even at such an early age, to really love the horses.

“He loves being in the barn,” said Stephanie. The show horse industry may just have another naturally talented Brannan on their hands. Hunter just may follow in his parent’s footsteps.



While working for the Beckers, Stephanie showed CH The Catwalk, and won the Two-Year-Old Three-Gaited class at Shelbyville and the ASR Sweepstakes Two-Year-Old Three-Gaited class at the All American Classic in 2009.



Chris, Stephanie, and Hunter Brannan meet Alex Rudder at the out gate at Lexington this year after Chris won the Junior Three-Gaited qualifier with I’m A Mystery.