

Kennebunk woman wants people to be hands-on, saddle-off with horses

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Laura Dolce photo Lexxie

By **Laura Dolce**
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KENNEBUNKPORT — Lauren Callahan doesn't speak much English.

Gabriela Rodriguez doesn't speak much French.

But standing on the green back lawn of the Nonantum Resort one early August morning, they find they have more in common than not.

The biggest thing they have in common is, in fact, an interest in something fairly large.

Lexxie, Rodriguez's Arabian mare, stands next to her as Lauren reaches up a hand to stroke her neck. Already, Lexxie has nuzzled Lauren's big sister Victoria's head, and now it is Lauren's turn.

"They both ride," explains the girls' grandmother, Claire Callahan. "They're from Normandy, France."

The Callahans are staying at the Nonantum. They discovered Rodriguez and Lexxie, they said, when they looked out of the window of their room and saw them standing on the lawn with the Kennebunk River for a backdrop.

While hotel guests may find it unusual to see a woman and a horse out on the lawn, Rodriguez has made it a practice to turn up in unexpected places, and always in the company of her horses Lexxie and Fritz.

During the summer, Rodriguez and her horses can be found at the Nonantum and the nearby Colony. In the fall, you can find her riding Fritz with Lexxie trotting alongside on the sands of Gooch's Beach. And year-round all three, along with Rodriguez's husband, Dan Quinn, can be found at their small West Kennebunk barn, where Rodriguez welcomes guests for what she calls "Horse Therapy."

The therapy is the newest horse-centric idea Rodriguez has come up with. Part therapy, part learning experience, the two-hour session endeavors to teach participants about horses "out of the saddle," as Rodriguez puts it.

Teaching people about horses in a non-traditional way is what Rodriguez is all about. While she never intended to own horses, Rodriguez said she suddenly found herself owning Blue, a big white horse that had been abused, more than 10 years ago.

"He was angry, he didn't like people," she recalls. "He didn't trust anybody."

Looking for a companion for Blue, Rodriguez found herself with Lexxie not long later. Having two horses — and especially one who needed to be taught to trust — helped Rodriguez decide how she would build her life as a horse owner. She wouldn't, she decided, be one who leases horses out or uses a crop harshly. And she wouldn't be all about riding.

In fact, she decided early on that she wouldn't ride Lexxie at all. Instead, she would help her and Blue learn to trust in their own time, as beloved members of the family.

"To me, horses are just like big dogs," she says. "I probably shouldn't say that, but they are."

Rodriguez uses the same commands she uses with her three dogs — "come," "wait" and "no" — with her horses. And she explains her philosophy at each of the speaking engagements she has.

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For more information on Blixx Horse Therapy or public appearances, contact Gabriela Rodriguez at 985-1994 or blixx@myfairpoint.net

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While experts say horses should have jobs, she says, Lexxie does have one. It may not be riding, but it's a job just the same.

"Her job is to educate and teach people about horses," she says. "She makes people aware."

In that, Rodriguez is a willing partner. Until she lost Blue last year, Rodriguez used to bring him to area retirement and nursing homes, allowing seniors to spend time with her senior horse. She created a business, Blixx — short for Blue and Lexxie — to better take her message to people.

Rodriguez teaches people to treat their horses with gentleness and kindness and explains how she cares for her horses, from the vitamin supplements she gives them to the coverings she puts on them to keep flies away. A visit to her barn — surprisingly clean and free of manure — offers visitors a chance to get hands-on horse experience.

Today, Fritz has joined Lexxie as her new companion, and Rodriguez takes both on visits to places such as the Nonantum.

"Gabriela does a great job of introducing horses to people," says Nonantum Activities Director Barbara Lisa. "It's almost therapeutic."

Rodriguez has several more appearances to make at both the Colony and the Nonantum this summer. And after that, she'll be making her way back to the beach, where she'll welcome people's questions and the opportunity to teach them more about the animals she loves.

"There's a lot horses can give," she says.

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