

Mak rode Toby a few more times, but I could see her confidence fading away with each challenge Toby presented her, until eventually Mak only wanted to walk Toby around and do "ground work" with him in the round pen. I would ask Mak each week "are you going to ride today?" and each week, she would answer, "no, I think I'll work with Toby in the round pen".

I knew what Mak was trying to accomplish; she wanted desperately to overcome her fear. Yet each time Toby chose to ignore her or challenge her authority, she would become frustrated or fearful. She did try a few more times to ride, but each time, even the slightest increase in speed at the walk or a jerk or flinch from Toby would cause Mak to breakdown and cry. I was beginning to wonder if Makayla would ever conquer her overwhelming fear, yet she kept trying.

Fast forward to today. As that small prayer left my lips, I turned to pull the round pen gate wide to allow Mak to lead our 17 hand 2000 pound draft horse cross pinto through and into the middle of the round pen. Makayla had taken a liking to Galli, Goliath, as most of us call him. Yep, our little cowgirl who was trying to overcome her fear issues had chose the biggest horse on the ranch to accomplish this!

Mak has been on Galli a few times, each time a bit longer, but the fear was still there and at times was more than she could handle. Getting up on this gentle giant is the easy part; it's the moving that just terrifies Makayla!

This has been the confusing part for me. Mak will try each week, all set and ready to give a ride on Galli a try. However, each time she ended up so upset and fearful. We just were not getting anywhere. Even with all my encouragement and coaching, I would explain to her that this beautiful horse, this horse that God created, is just a big gentle giant, he doesn't want to hurt you, he doesn't even want you to fall, he just wants you to tell him where to go and what to do. I just could not get her past the fear of moving. I would coach Mak; pull the outside rein, take him back to the rail! She would only half heartily pull, become frustrated when Galli would counter with resistance, then the tears would well up in Mak's beautiful dark eyes, and she would give up. I was becoming frustrated and very concerned about whether we should even continue trying at all. Maybe Makayla should not be riding. Some people just are not ever going to be comfortable on a horse, and maybe this is the case with Mak.

The same scenario was playing out again today. But, today was different in that Galli was figuring out that Mak was afraid to take the reins and control him. So, Galli would wander off the fence come into the center of the round pen and stand by me. I would coach Mak to pull him hard and bump with your heels, get him back on the fence! But, when Galli would ignore her she started to break down, fear was gaining its ugly hold on Mak once again.

Galli was looking at me with his big gentle soft eyes as he plodded to the center of the round pen. He stopped and looked at me, everything about him said, I'm just a big ole poky slow draft horse I'm sorry, but she just isn't telling me well enough what to do! Help! I looked up at Makayla, she was in tears, and she was trembling. I looked back into Galli's eyes, big round pools of liquid black. I was just about ready to say; ok enough is enough, I can't keep putting you through this Mak. Then it hit me; she wasn't afraid of the horse or even moving she was afraid of not being able to control the horse! So much so, she would just give up and freeze! She just could not trust herself to keep herself safe. As a result, Galli would wander this way and that way in the round pen.

As Galli was standing next to me in the round pen, with both of us waiting for Mak to gain her composure, a fly flew by me and bounced off Galli's nose, he jerk, which caused Mak to completely lose control of her fear. Big tears streamed down her face; again, I could see her hands trembling. I immediately told Mak, "its ok! A fly hit his nose, he was sleeping, he just reacted" At that moment I was just about to tell Makayla, ok that's it, we're done, when I thought, no, Jesus bare with me right now, give me words, give Makayla courage. I poked Galli in the nose. Galli flinched! I could see Makayla react with fear in her eyes from that got ya - wake up call the adrenaline shoots through your heart when your horse gives you a start! Mak flinched and the tears welled up again.

Mak looked at me, with a why did you do that hurt look? I took a deep breath, I glanced over at her mom who was sitting under the shade of a tree nearby watching and encouraging when needed. I began, "Mak, get control of your fear! You are not afraid of this horse, you know why?" She looked at me with big wet questioning eyes, "God made him to be a big gentle horse, a kind horse; he doesn't want to hurt you! You are afraid of the feeling of not being in control! You shouldn't be! You can control him! God gave him a spirit of willingness; he wants to please you! Trust me, trust Galli, and trust yourself! Now take that horse over to the fence and go around this pen!"

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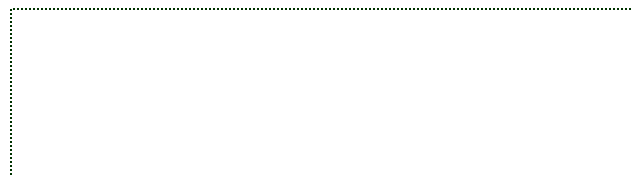
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D.O.V.E.S. WINTER ISSUE 2011

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DOVES Message

OVERCOMING FEAR

By Gayle Oxford

July 28, 2011

As I pushed open the gate to the round pen, I said a silent prayer "Please Jesus, let this be the day!"

Makayla, a young girl of about 16, had been coming to our ranch for a couple of years now, her dark eyes and dimpled smile was always a joy to see when her and her brother, Mitchell arrived at the ranch for their lessons. The whole family enjoyed coming to the ranch for their weekly visits, mostly mom brought them out but on occasion, dad and sometimes both. The whole family also enjoyed taking photos of all the activity, and especially Mak, as we all called her, she is very talented at taking great photos of candid moments and of the kids on the horses. Mak had become our "official photographer" and she would post hundreds of photos on her face book page for everyone to enjoy!

Mak and Mitchell had both become very good riders and had been through a couple of horses each before finding the right match for them. Mak had been riding a gelding, Toby for a few months, and they seemed to be getting along well together, in fact, Mak was becoming pretty attached to Toby. The two were a good match size wise; Mak being about 5' 5" and Toby about 14.1 hands, they made a nice picture. Mak's equitation was perfection! Sitting straight, heels down, toes up and looking straight ahead. Mak had good hands and rode well in the saddle, mostly at the walk, and she was getting more comfortable with the trot, but still did not want to trot much. That was ok; she would build her confidence in Toby and herself. That's what I thought, until the "fall".

It was an early autumn day, and the kids were riding in our large arena where we had obstacles set out for the horses and kids to negotiate. Mak was riding along the back fence line about fifty feet away. I had my back slightly turned to Mak, as I was instructing another child. All of a sudden, I heard Mak's panicked yell, and turned to see, Toby throwing his head up and galloping toward me. I don't know exactly what happened, was he spooked by something? Did he trip and then panic? I just remember thinking; hold on Makayla! Boy was she trying to hold on! But she lost her balance and off she came, hitting the ground hard! Toby came to a stop. A volunteer ran to get Toby, I and another volunteer raced for Mak. When we got to her, she has attempting to get up, she was trying to hold back the tears and I could see how scared she was. I told her to be still for a minute, let us check you out.

Makayla was fine, a bruised hip and a frightening few moments. Her brother Mitchell had run to get his mom and we all walked Mak and Toby back to the smaller arena. We encouraged Mak to get back on Toby and she did. We all made a big fuss about how brave she was to get back on and "cowgirl up"! But, I saw that dreaded look of fear and uncertainty in those dark bright eyes, even though she was trying her best to overcome that fear, Makayla had come face to face with the reality that riding a horse can be dangerous. That the horse she had trusted betrayed her. All along, she thought she was in control; when in reality, the horse was in control. That was scary. I couldn't help but think; would Makayla ever trust Toby again, or another horse or worst yet could she trust herself to take the reins and keep control!

