

Hoofin' it across the High Desert

Ride to raise awareness of domestic violence

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

If you see a woman on a horse coming up the road, stop and ask her what they're doing: there's a good chance they'll want to talk to you, too.

Meredith Cherry and Apollo, a Peruvian Paso-Mustang, are in the early stages of a trip through all 48 contiguous U.S. states, and are stopping whenever they can to raise awareness about domestic violence.

"I am a survivor of an abusive marriage," said Cherry. "When I left, I was thinking about what I wanted to do with my new life. I decided I wanted to travel by horse. I appreciated that I had the opportunity to do it, and wanted to do something good with it."

Cherry, 34, and Apollo, 9, started in Grass Valley, California, and made their way west. She traveled up the coastline, turning eastward again a little north of Bandon. Once she reached Eugene, she traveled north on roads paralleling Interstate 5 all the way to Seattle. Bound eastward, she crossed Snoqualmie Pass and wound her way through central Washington, ending up in the Tri-Cities before crossing back into Oregon. On Tuesday night, she stayed at the Pendleton Round-Up Grounds, and Wednesday night she will stay with a family near Wildhorse Resort & Casino.

Now, she is headed for Idaho, in her quest to ride through a part of every U.S. state.

"My end destination will be Maine — in three to four years," Cherry said. So far, Cherry and Apollo have covered nearly 1,700 miles. By the end of the trip, if all goes as planned, they will complete 10,000 miles.

The pair also tries to avoid the main roads.

"The biggest danger on this trip is cars," Cherry said. "If a big truck comes down the road or even a car, and they're not paying attention or (Apollo) suddenly shies at something and steps into the road, our trip is over. So I stay on as many low-traffic roads



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Meredith Cherry and her horse, Apollo, are traveling across the county in support of domestic violence awareness.

as possible without adding too much mileage."

As she rides, Cherry tries to stop where she can and talk to people about domestic violence.

"My message is to break the silence," she said. "Domestic violence is often not talked about. There's a lot of victim-blaming, even from people who know better. There's the impression that it's the victim's fault for getting or staying in a relationship."

Cherry said she tries to stop and speak with people at shelters, but she doesn't always know where she'll be in advance making it difficult to plan to be at those places. Instead, she tries to share her message with anyone who stops to ask what she's doing.

"It may not be that unusual in Pendleton to see a person riding a horse down the street," she said with a laugh, "but in many parts of the country, it's very strange, so people will stop and ask me what I'm doing. There's lots of opportunities to talk."

Overall, Cherry said, she's received a warm reception.

"There are so many people who have gone through abusive relationships," she said. "Even people who have never experi-

enced it know someone who has. I get a lot of encouragement from people."

She said there have only been a few people who have been completely unaware of domestic violence, or to whom she's had to explain it.

"I spent some time talking about it, how it works, and how it's not the fault of the person stuck in the situation," she said.

Cherry and Apollo usually ride five days a week, and stop for the weekend. Typically, they find someone who will accommodate them, whether a family or a stable. Cherry carries a tent with her so she can sleep outside, but many times, she's found that people will let her use a guest room, and put Apollo in the yard.

"Some of my equipment is sponsored, but my ride expenses so far have been covered by the kindness of strangers," she said. She also has a GoFundMe page, and a blog where she documents her adventures.

"I need a place to stay every 10 to 15 miles," she said. "And it's pretty much all been strangers. I try to plan a week in advance."

Sometimes, people she stays with in one city will know someone in a future destination

that Cherry can stay with, but often she'll just search for a place that accommodates horses. So far, though, Cherry said she has found someone who will let her and Apollo stay every night.

"I think it's easier with a horse," she said. "People are always happy to see a horse. They're not always happy to see a backpacker."

Apollo has adjusted to the journey well, Cherry said. She trained him for two years prior to the trip. The horse is comfortable around people, too.

"He thinks everyone exists to pet him," she said. "And he's not fazed by anything anymore."

Cherry said her decision to make the trip on horseback, rather than via bike or on foot, came from a longtime love of horses.

"I've been riding horses since I was 16," she said. "And there's just something about a horse. It's nicer traveling with a horse companion than by myself."

Cherry maintains a Facebook page about her trip, as well as a blog, www.centauride.org.

Contact Jayati Ramakrishnan at jramakrishnan@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4534.

BRIEFLY

Hermiston officers on the lookout for good deeds

HERMISTON — The Hermiston Police Department wants you to chill.

At least, that's what they're hoping will happen with their annual partnership with 7-Eleven for "Operation Chill," a program to reduce crime in the community and strengthen the relationship between the police and local youth.

During the summer, officers will be keeping an eye out for kids exhibiting positive behavior, such as wearing seat belts or bike helmets, using crosswalks, and performing various good deeds. These, and many other actions, can help youth earn a ticket for a free Slurpee from an officer.

"Much of this profession is negative in nature, in the sense we normally do not get calls from citizens when something good has happened," said Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston. "This program with 7-Eleven gives our officers the ability to interact with our youth in a positive way."

In addition to routine patrols by Hermiston officers to "catch" kids doing good things, the department's school resource officers will rotate back to patrol duty for the summer.

ODOT repaving section of Tollgate Hwy near Weston

WESTON — Drivers can expect delays up to 20 minutes as the Oregon Department of Transportation repaves a section of Highway 204 between the Weston junction and milepost 3.5.

The work is expected to be finished within the next two weeks. Crews, equipment and possible pilot cars will be on the roadway between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekdays.

Travelers should slow down and watch for workers through the area. Traffic fines are double in all work zones.

Drone expert to speak at NARFE meeting

PENDLETON — Guest speaker at the monthly meeting of the National Association of Retired Federal Employees Chapter 2115 is drone expert Dwight Johnson.

The meeting is scheduled for Thursday at 11:30 a.m. at Shari's Restaurant, 319 S.E. Nye Ave. Johnson will talk about drones and their uses after a no-host lunch. This is the last regular meeting until October.

For more information, call Janet Lambert at 541-980-3268.

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