



From cattle ranching to making a real difference in her community of Eagle Point, Carole Mercer has always had a “can-do” attitude. She sets large goals – “I think in terms of the big picture,” she says – and she gets results.

It all started in 1987, when she bought a neglected ranch in Eagle Point. Carole saw its potential: “It was like a good horse with wonderful confirmation that was in poor shape.” She came to the Rogue Valley from Woodside, California. She was burned out. She had supported her daughter, Sarah, and the huge mortgage payment she “got” in a bitter divorce by teaching special education in inner city Bay Area schools and later traveling around the country giving lectures on how to teach disadvantaged kids. When someone asked her, Well, what do you really want to do? she had her answer. “I want to be a cowgirl.”

That was not as far-fetched as it may seem. Carole grew up in

By Roberta Kent

Wyoming, where her father was a psychiatrist at a veteran's hospital. “I don't remember a time when I didn't ride,” she says. “It seemed that I was always on a horse.” When her parents moved to the Palo Alto area, Carole went from a western saddle to an English one. She did pony club, she jumped, she learned dressage. And, she learned to drive a horse and carriage. Through the years, Carole never lost her connection to horses. It was her touchstone, the grounding that saved her.

She shared that love of horses with her daughter, Sarah, who was ten years old when they moved to Eagle Point. Sarah had learned to ride almost before she could walk. She was graceful and elegant. Carole has pictures of the blond, blue-eyed girl on a pony, on a burro, riding side-saddle on a Morgan horse in the proper outfit. But Sarah was happiest curled up with a book. “We were very, very different. But we always were supportive of each other, willing to share each other's worlds, each other's interests,” Carole recalls.

Carole learned about cattle from her capable ranching neighbors. Her horsemanship got her a job “riding the alley” at the Rogue Valley Livestock Auction, moving cattle from the sale ring down concrete chutes to the holding pens. “I even showed up one day riding side-saddle. The cowboys loved it,” she says.

She fixed up the ranch, adding on to the basic, A-frame house and the outbuildings. She remembers, “There was a huge hay barn and a concrete shed with four box stalls, each three feet deep in sheep manure. I literally shoveled those stalls out by hand. I hauled out seven stock trailer loads of manure.” The barn was repaired. New stall doors and roof were put on the shed. Carole built a new tack room and a roomy work space/garage. Fences were repaired and added. The field by the creek was irrigated with a wheel line. The upper fields were irrigated by old-fashioned flood irrigation.

Sarah Mercer graduated from Eagle Point High School in 1995 and enrolled at University of California, Santa Cruz. Her major was French Literature. She was being groomed by the UCSC faculty for a Rhodes Scholarship.

Then, on May 24, 1997, Carole Mercer's world caved in. Sarah Mercer was hit by a car and killed while jogging near the UCSC campus. She was 19 years old, in the spring of her sophomore year.

Carole remembers very little of that first year after Sarah's death: "It was as though I had been diagnosed with a terminal disease." She became severely depressed. Suddenly, this could do almost nothing. She found that she place where there were other people -- even

It was the donations that started to bring her in Sarah's name. With the \$7,000 she Eagle Point High School. It continues to one for academic achievement, one to a and one for vocational studies. The the fund within ten years. One recipient has

There was also the Eagle Point Library. to do something that I knew would have property in Medford that would have gone property over to the Eagle Point Library and new library.

There is a life-size portrait of Sarah in the go to see her that isn't home." Carole gives a birthday, and she knows where every book

Last Christmas, Carole started a tree lighting ceremony in Eagle Point. There had previously been vandalism problems with the city's Christmas tree. Carole began a campaign where residents could buy a light in honor or in memory of someone. There are now 25 to 30 "names" on the tree, and there is a strong feeling that the tree and the lights "belong" to the community. No one has harmed the tree. "Everything I've done -- the scholarship, the library, the tree -- isn't about me," Carole says emphatically. It is about Sarah and the community."

But, Carole found that community action was not enough. "I was desperate to re-invent myself," she says. "It was: Do that -- or die. I had to take this terrible tragedy and find some purpose to go on."



woman who thought she could do anything was unable even to leave the ranch. Going to any the grocery store -- became impossible.

"back to life ." Friends wanted to make donations received, Carole set up a scholarship fund at grow. Four scholarships are awarded each year: minority student, one for studies in agriculture, recipients are expected to give 25 dollars back to already given back 40 dollars.

"Sarah loved the library," Carole says. "I wanted made her happy." Carole had an investment to Sarah. Now Sarah was gone. Carole signed the its sale bought the building site for the town's

library, which Carole says is "the one place I can book to the library every year on Sarah's that has Sarah's name is placed.

At first, creating a carriage business was a way of using all the skills she already had. What she soon discovered was that the carriage rides made people happy, and helped them connect with family and friends in ways that few things do. In some cases, the rides changed their lives. Carole found herself having in-depth conversations with her passengers. A carriage moves to a slower pace; there is time to think, to enjoy the small things like flowers along the road, birds, clouds. People would talk about the losses in their lives, and slowly -- with the sharing -- Carole began to heal.

Carole brings out scrapbooks with letters from the brides who have been delivered to their weddings in her carriages, from the school groups and retirement homes that have made trips to see "how it used to be." She does "pumpkin rides" before Halloween, "caroling rides" before Christmas and "sparkling cider rides" for special occasions. She treasures the drawings that kids have sent and the notes from families that found a new connection while riding behind a perfectly matched pair of Morgan mares. "These books re-validate who I am and what I do," Carole believes. She has recently expanded the carriage driving business into teaching carriage driving and hosting driving workshops.

According to Carole, ranch life is immensely satisfying because she is intimately connected to her living environment. "I can feel it when a horse gets out of field," she says. "I know where the cattle are on the property and when they are off the property, without looking." And everything has a time and a season. For example, Carole mainly heats her home by a wood stove. To get enough cured wood for the winter, she will cut dead wood from the oaks on her property in late spring, before the drought of summer and fire season. The wood has time to age. Her wood box is set next to the deck by her back door, and she says, "In the winter -- as I go in and out doing chores -- I bring in one piece of wood each time."

As much as possible, Carole uses her seven horses to do things on a ranch that are usually done by tractor: pulling a wagon with hay for cattle, harrowing a field, hauling in wood. "I am back to working with horses for the pure enjoyment of it," she says.

Carole Mercer knows herself well: "I think in terms of the big picture. I start with a plan and know where I want it to go." The stripped-down ranch that she bought back in 1987 now boasts a large covered arena space, an obstacle carriage driving course, and a white-fenced, grassy dressage arena overlooked by a garden and gazebo. She has added a carriage storage shed, a lace-decorated "bride's cottage" and a lighted "doll's house" as a staging and serving area for catered events. Recently, she bought adjacent acreage across the creek from the original plat and has painstakingly cleared driving roads and riding trails. "Before the rains this year -- while I could still cross the creek -- I was over there at least once, sometimes twice a day, on horseback or in a carriage," she says.

Last summer, Carole hosted a group of inner-city kids for the Portola Academic Mentoring Program's summer adventure on a ranch. She has been named the Grand Marshal of Eagle Point's Fourth of July Parade. She has been honored by the library. This year, she was asked to light the town's Christmas tree.

She has found a new life and new reasons to continue. Especially at the dawn of this new year, Carole Mercer's example can be an inspiration to us all.