

Valery's Story
Reins of Life, Inc. Founder
Valery St. Clair

Q1: What drew you to therapeutic horseback riding? When, why and how did you realize therapeutic riding lessons were needed in St. Joseph county?

I was drawn to therapeutic horseback riding because horses meant more to me than a pastime or fun activity. I had experienced multiple deeply traumatic incidences as early as preschool and into my teens. At the time I didn't realize it, but in horses I found non-judgmental companions that also needed me to care for them, it was important to be needed. This coupled with the fact that I loved being outdoors made horses a perfect match for me. My \$200.00 first horse had flaws, but he likely saved my life. The chance meeting of a 4-H Horse and Pony Father and an Arabian horse breeder, Gina Manion, who lived down the road, and support of my parents allowed me to pursue further horse endeavors. The horse activities and relationships with them allowed me to be successful, to gain confidence, learn management skills, and experience event planning fund-raising.

Then graduating a year early from High School, I was faced with a school and career decision, a long story short, I became a nurse. While in my first job at a local hospital, I couldn't shake a strong desire to take all my patients with multiple illnesses and disabilities physical and emotional and colleagues out into the fresh air and sunshine and onto horses. I started talking about it and researching the possibility of therapy of any kind with a horse and found the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, where Lis Hartel who had Polio, rode her horse to a Silver Medal and credited her horse for her healing. That led me to The Cheff Center and Loveway.

After visiting The Cheff Center I immediately signed up for testing for a spot to become a Head Instructor Administration training aimed at Founding a Therapeutic Riding Center. After rigorous written, riding and riding instructor testing Lida McCowan accepted me as a student with her as mentor. Lida had one request of me, to visit Loveway founders to discuss me joining them or if we could foresee two programs being supported in northern Indiana.

While at Cheff Center there was a North American Riding for Handicapped, NARHA event and I was contacted by multiple programs with job offers. But, I kept thinking that my hometown needed a riding program. So, I set up a visit to Loveway to make good on my promise to Lida McCowan and to see what their opinion would be. Upon my visit to Loveway, their full-grown lion, yes lion, walked into the room where I was sitting alone while my hostess was making tea. What an experience, a lion. One may have thought I should have been scared off, but my visit blossomed into mutually helpful relationships and friendships with two separate and needed program.

Q2: What is your favorite memory of back when Reins of Life, Inc. was just beginning?

There are so many early favorite memories it's near impossible to choose one. If forced to pick one, I guess it would have to be either the first day that riders were finally able to mount their horses or the day that fist summer when Lida McCowan came to visit and give her thumbs up or down for Reins of Life to become a NARHA approved program.

There are not words that can adequately describe the immense joy and satisfaction felt, after all the hard work, seeing the horses, volunteers, and finally riders upon their horses come together working in unison with ear to ear grins that sunny first day. It truly was a dream come true and yet was still in the dreaming process. Then the day Lida McCowan visited, it was so serious, hoping everything went perfect and it did, a sigh of relief. We then served Lida lunch around the host farm family's (Murray's) pool. All seemed well and she began speaking about her observations of the riding sessions when several of our youngest volunteers suddenly moved towards Lida and then threw her, leather boots and all, into the pool. My immediate thoughts, what were they thinking, did they not hear anything I had told them, there went our chances of NARHA approval...Lida came up out of the water smiling

and laughing, saying, "Well, I had been wishing I brought a swim suit, does this program with its pool, supply towels and leather boot saddle soap? We were indeed approved.

Q3: When you envisioned ROL what were your expectations?

Even before my Dream for Reins Of Life came into focus I had begun envisioning and desiring a large Equestrian Riding, Training, Educational and Event Center that wasn't only for the wealthy or top 10% of riders in the country and not limited to one type of riding. I knew how much a relationship with my first \$200.00 horse, which, by the way included a western saddle, blanket, bridal and halter, benefited me and I wanted others to benefit the same regardless of their abilities.

The closer I got to Reins of Life moving from a dream to reality the clearer my expectation became. All along I juxtaposed the ideal Equestrian Center if money was flowing with no limit against reality of getting the most for the limited funds of any current moment, keeping priorities in order. Especially in the early days it was important to appreciate and to be content and make do with the facilities, horses and equipment that we had, mostly borrowed, while not mixing up contentment with complacency. I was content but not complacent, still fueled full of drive to improve to serve more clients, for more hours, better, year round with a greater variety of options with a permanent facility.

I spent countless nights, while my kids were sleeping, at my kitchen table drawing out various facilities for different presentations, grant writing and fund-raising opportunities. I developed a set of module type drawings that could be interchanged depending on the audience to see them or requesting them. Eventually, Troyer Group Architects took an interest in Reins of Life and I spent a lot of time with the owner both at my kitchen table and in his office to work up a preliminary blueprint and then a 3-D model. I remember a significant annual dinner and meeting at which we unveiled the 3-D model and drawings, there was a different buzz in the crowd. Conversations moved from if Reins of Life had a home of its own to when Reins of Life breaks ground on its permanent facility.....!

In every part of the dreaming, drawing and development of a Reins of Life facility the most important driving force leading me to envisioning the future was the multifaceted benefits and pure joy that riders and volunteers alike would receive and that I saw on their faces. I envisioned a place where everyone was welcome, and each came to use and or share whatever abilities they had. It shouldn't matter if all they had to give was a smile or a tear or the ability to ride or teach or walk alongside another, whether rich or not, whether two legged or four legged we can each come and have the opportunity to become better and to help others to become better whether it is physical, mental, social, or emotional. In our youngest volunteers I envisioned a place for them to spend time in a positive way exposing them to good role model relationships and possible future careers that they may not otherwise have dreamed of doing. I could literally fill pages with developing visions for Reins of Life.

With a history of many generous donors, in many ways the Reins of Life of today, 40 years later, is exactly what I envisioned. The only main difference is that I had never envisioned that I wouldn't be spending 90 hours a week, every week at Reins of Life, living there figuratively or literally, or at least next door. During early years of financial struggle for Reins of Life, I didn't take any payment for my services and I worked in the few hours I could spare as a nurse, often on the night shift so I could attend to Reins during daylight hours. Eventually Reins of Life's Board of Directors insisted they could pay me for some of my teaching lesson time, I believe it was ten hours of pay a week; of course, I still worked voluntarily 40-50 hours more a week. Then, my husband's work took us out of town, I had not envisioned that. Fortunately, after only a year his work brought us to live in the Lakeville area.

Shortly after moving back to area I helped with Special Olympics Equestrian Competition and then I was contacted to come back to Reins, which I accepted. Reins was still working with just about everything borrowed and I with the help of many generous dedicated people, including my family, worked to develop Reins of Life and serve riders and volunteers.

Finally, the visions and blueprints and 3-D model lead to the donation of property by, you know who ☺ The end of trailering horses was in sight, yahoo and God Bless. Once we had excavating done and arena fencing donations in the works we had a land dedication. Despite the rented big tent being stolen in the night under the cover of one of the foggiest mornings ever, it was a successful, memorable and a beneficial day in Reins of Life's history. Then, events of life not envisioned took place and I was tearfully pulled and tugged in a different direction. After having worked under every title at Reins of Life and having done every job from bringing Reins out of a dream, to scooping horse poop, hauling hoses and treating horse ringworm, to accepting the first dollar and horse donations and finally Land donation I was being led to have to resign---not envisioned. The one thing that made sense at the time of my heart wrenching resignation was an overwhelming feeling that my dream and vision for Reins of Life needed to be taken more to heart by others. Even after being gone for a year, it seemed like there were many generous dedicated people helping me with my dream, Reins of Life; it needed to be their dream too. I knew that for my dream to succeed and go to the next level, others needed to fight for it (some negative-naysayers existed very close) and make it happen as their shared dream. It seemed the only way for that to happen was for me to step aside and not be there to be the one to fall back on; I risked everything I worked for counting on the generosity and tenacity of other good people to pick up my dream and carry it on. To them, and they know who they are, I say thank you and God Bless you and please keep up the good work!

(Over the years I helped Reins of Life, still my dream, without most people knowing by being a public relations champion, doing some public speaking, writing articles and letters, praying and donations as able, etc. I've taken great joy over the years hearing people tell me or others about this great program, Reins of Life...I just smile and listen and encourage them to keep being or getting involved. Then in 2018, 40 years into the making of Reins of Life, I came full circle and became a rider to enable me to be strengthened for a then, upcoming surgery. Of course, with the generosity of all at Reins of Life and Aly's kind and firm assistance and Cocoa's warm curly hair, strong back and friendly nuzzle my core was strengthened and for the time I was mounted my pain melted away. I had a successful outcome from surgery and anticipate coming back to complete my physical therapy.

Q4: If you wanted people to know one thing about Reins of Life what would it be?

If you just do it, get involved, no matter how much you give, you will get more out of it! Whether it's your time or services or money or driving a client for lessons, no matter what, you will benefit, the more you get into it the more you will get out of it! If you don't believe me, just try it for yourself. You don't even need to be a horse person, but you will be their champion before you're done.