

Idaho, One Horse Who Inspired an International Quest

By Angela Kirby

“What an unattractive horse!” Debi Metcalfe considerably kept that thought to herself when she got an eyeful of her husband Harold’s new mare. To add to the ugly, the mare was intolerable. When approached, she sidestepped farther away and laid her ears back, daring the challenger to come closer. After boarding the horse for several months, Debi was dismayed when Harold announced that he was actually buying her. The mare’s nasty disposition and unappealing color completely put Debi off, so she was less than happy at Harold’s decision. She had expected the mare to be gone from the farm soon enough. On the other hand, Harold was counting on his almost-new bride to love him enough to let him keep her. And, of course, he was right. Debi just couldn’t tell him no even after almost two years of marriage. Debi hadn’t expected when she and Harold were married in 1987 that she would soon have to share Harold’s affection with another female ... and certainly not a horse. And then she couldn’t help but wonder: Why THIS one?

At 15 hands, the odd, tri-colored, spotted Racking Horse mare, with her bi-lateral four-beat gait, was intended to be Harold’s comfortable trail horse. After observing the horse’s quirky ways, Debi was unsure about this new addition to the family, but there was no doubt she would definitely be her husband’s horse. Debi had known immediately she wanted nothing to do with the crazy animal. Harold, however, had seen something in the four-year-old mare that Debi didn’t. He seemed to have the ability to look into the mare’s soul, and he found a horse that was tough on the outside but wounded on the inside. Harold was determined to cultivate a relationship with the one called Idaho.

Harold had an insightful eye after years of teaching physical education classes at the local high school. Over those years, he had learned to key in on the hurting souls of the children he often taught. Observing Idaho, he knew she was no different. She was misunderstood and simply needed someone to listen and understand in order to reach her full potential.

As the days went by, Debi watched from a distance while Harold patiently spoke to the mare, and Idaho measured the man before her. Debi observed in great wonder at the rhythmic dance the man and horse developed – almost a type of courtship. As Harold quietly stood in the center of the pen, Idaho would circle him exactly five times before cautiously stretching her nose toward the six-foot, two-inch tall man. Soon afterward, picking up one foot at a time, the mare would extend her body until she stood relaxed and within easy reach.

The dance progressed over the years as the relationship between Idaho and Harold deepened. Debi loved nothing more than to study her husband astride Idaho, while they gaited as one, their movement fluid and graceful. A romantic at heart, Debi had grown up dreaming of meeting her knight in shining armor. The image that gripped her, as Harold sat regally atop the mostly white horse, her brown markings fading with time, was that of her girlhood fantasy. Without even realizing it, Debi was warming up to Idaho.

A Heartbreak Like No Other

Debi and Harold’s family, which included their daughter Cory and son Casey, along with an exchange student, Vania, enjoyed trail-riding horses with friends. They often spent weekends in the mountains, soaking up the peace and quiet of the beautiful countryside. After one such weekend, the Metcalfes returned to their quiet farm in Cleveland County, North Carolina at the foothills of the Blue

Ridge Mountains. There was nothing indicating that on the following Friday their lives would be turned inside out and changed forever.

Nearing the end of September, the weather was cool and the fairgrounds were hopping with activity. On that fateful fall Friday, Debi, Harold, and their children attended the Cleveland County Fair – an annual family tradition. Each of them looked forward to exhibiting their horses and enjoying food and fun as usual. After a late night at the fair, the Metcalfe's left the big lights and noise behind for a good night's sleep at home in the country. The next morning, Debi was to discover just how much Idaho had come to mean to Harold and inevitably to her.

Harold awoke and left the house early on the crisp morning of September 26, 1997, the night after the county fair. Later, Debi began to wonder to where he had gone. It wasn't long before she realized something was terribly wrong. From the same window where she'd once watched her tenderhearted husband gentling Idaho, she now saw him quickly heading toward the house, his face etched with worry and his stride determined. The first words that tumbled out of Harold's mouth as he tried to catch his breath were, "Debi, she's gone. I can't find Idaho anywhere."

Harold rambled on while Debi began wrapping her thoughts around what he was saying. He'd searched the pasture on foot. The other horses were there. A horse didn't wander off and leave the herd unless she was hurt or someone made her. Harold couldn't rationalize why Idaho wasn't with them, and his worry quickly escalated. While Harold was normally the calm and rational one in their marriage, Debi immediately assumed that role as her beloved husband's concern washed over her.

Leaving Debi to call neighbors and notify them that Idaho was missing, Harold returned to saddle up one of their Tennessee Walking horses and continue the search on horseback. It wasn't long before the truth was uncovered, and when it was, it brought the Metcalfe's to their knees in despair and grief.

While walking the fence along the dirt road running between the Metcalfe's home and pasture, Debi discovered, hidden among some overgrowth, a section of barbed wire had been cut. Frantically, she called to Harold. He trotted over on his horse and jumped off. From the opening in the fence, they were able to trace Idaho's steps to the road where they found tire tracks. It was apparent that the spotted racking horse mare hadn't wandered off on her own. Their next call was to local law enforcement to speak the unthinkable – Idaho had been stolen.

Like many horse owners, Debi and Harold believed that once the sheriff's department had the details and they filed a report, Idaho would be found in a short period of time. Unfortunately, horse theft is not part of most police training academies, so the deputies were as lost as the Metcalfes about what to do next.

Determined Debi

While the Metcalfes were having a hard time developing rational thoughts, there was one reality that couldn't escape them. Idaho wouldn't be found wandering down the road a few miles from home. The evidence of that was in the tire tracks and the cut fence.

Trying to imagine the fear and confusion that Idaho must be feeling, Debi began to develop a plan of action. She knew that Idaho depended on her family. And Debi also couldn't stand by and let her husband's world collapse around him. Debi kicked her energy and emotions into gear and became determined to find Idaho.

Turning to the relatively new world of the Internet, Debi wasted no time learning how to navigate this advancement in technology. Once she logged on, her search expanded from a few-mile radius of their

home to homes thousands of miles away. But that was 1997, and the Internet was still wet behind the ears. There were no Internet resources about horse theft to rely on for help.

Horse theft existed, but it was a silent transgression in the equine world. People didn't talk about it much, because it was believed to be only a slim possibility. And if it did happen to that one unfortunate horse owner, there was little reason to report the theft, as there was an even smaller chance of the horse being recovered. Horse owners were just expected to move on and forget about the animal.

But try telling that to Debi. While the 12-year-old horse had worked her way into Debi's heart over the years, this woman was driven more by the pain of loving a heartbroken man. Harold's grief pushed her onward even on days when she was ready to give up. Debi refused to listen to those who told her that their horse was gone and to abandon the search.

Debi gained momentum by working through her fears, frustration, and mistrust. Stumbling through a learning curve of technology, Debi spent countless hours in front of the computer. She had to be reminded to eat and sleep. When not sending or receiving emails, she felt her hope diminish and doubt set in. Refusing to let that happen, she wore herself into the ground searching for Idaho. At the same time, she had to function as a wife and a mother.

For 51 weeks she spent every free moment sending e-mails, posting flyers, talking to strangers. Without realizing it, Debi was creating an alliance of concerned horse owners and other victims. These people rallied behind Debi and gave her renewed strength when hers waned. Faced with a complete loss of trust after something so precious had been ripped from her family, Debi found friends in strangers she had never met. These people help restore her faith that had been so crippled from Idaho's theft.

Traveling hundreds of miles that year to visit horse auctions or speak to people who might have encountered Idaho, the Metcalfes persisted in the search when friends and family members told them to give up. With great courage, the Metcalfes delved into a criminal world where few would dare to trespass. Shady thieves and traders quickly learned who Debi and Harold were and why they were there. These unassuming schoolteachers from a small town faced drug addicts and unscrupulous criminals without batting an eye. With Harold as her quiet pillar of strength, Debi discovered through their journey a power within herself that she never knew existed – and it was all because of a horse she had once thought of as an ugly duckling.

Almost a year after Idaho's theft, the Metcalfe's determination and stubbornness was rewarded. Shortly after the death of Debi's mother, an impromptu trip, with no actual destination, led the couple through winding roads of the Blue Ridge Mountains before they found themselves crossing the state line into Tennessee.

It was at a small convenience store in the middle of Cleveland County, Tennessee, that Idaho's story would take another dramatic turn. The Metcalfes, lost and looking for directions, taped their last flyer of Idaho in the store's glass door. Fatefully, a woman crossed paths with Debi and Harold in that same little off-the-map town. She provided vital information that led to Idaho's recovery.

According to the tipster, she knew the horse pictured on the Metcalfe's flyer. Their horse had been purchased by a family in Tennessee whose young girl had named her Lucy. Throughout the summer, Lucy had been shown successfully in gaited horse classes. Apparently, the horse had been through several auctions before being bought by this family a few months prior.

Exhausted from all of the false leads over the last year, the Metcalfes were reluctant at first to pursue the possibility that this horse was Idaho. When Debi asked for support from her online friends, they gave her the encouragement needed to try one more time. Debi met Harold at work to fill him in on the latest tip. After discussing how to proceed, the couple contacted the detective in charge of their case.

Within hours, a meeting was arranged with authorities in Tennessee, and Harold and Debi were on their way out of state. They were hopeful, but afraid at the same time. They couldn't deal with one more heartache.

At the sheriff's department, the Metcalfes were told they would be given a video tape of a horse show from which they needed to identify Idaho. During this time, authorities were in contact with the people in possession of the horse they called Lucy, making arrangements in the event the Metcalfes determined Lucy and Idaho were the same mare.

Having endured many grueling hours of anticipation since Debi first received the tip off the convenience store flyer, they were still not prepared for what happened next. When the spotted racking horse appeared on the screen, a grown man collapsed to his knees as a year of agonizing worry and searching culminated in that one moment. Once local authorities were satisfied that Lucy was, indeed, their stolen horse, a meeting was arranged for Debi and Harold to pick up Idaho and take her home.

Is This Idaho?

The Metcalfes were familiar with the pain of losing a horse they loved, and their hearts ached for the family being hurt. But it was time for Idaho to come home. Since taking the horse from her current owners was a stressful and tense situation, it was decided that the officers would bring the horse to the Metcalfes.

Debi stood anxiously with her husband as the little girl's show horse was led across a church parking lot by a sheriff's deputy. The mare's once bouncing stride was a slow, dispirited pace. Her head and tail hung low. This was not their Idaho but a broken horse. Over the years, Debi had come to admire Idaho's attitude and view the mare as a beautiful creature. But the horse she saw that day on the parking lot was not the graceful creature that had danced with Harold and proudly carried him.

Again, Harold's special relationship with the horse took on a life of its own. One whistle from Harold brought the mare to full attention. Her head raised and she sought out the familiar sound. Idaho's stride picked up and the familiar four-gait beat resounded on the hard ground as the mare eagerly greeted Harold. Within moments, the man's arms were around Idaho's neck as she cradled him. Debi laid her hands on Idaho's back – assuring herself that this was real and not just a mirage. The reunion between the Metcalfes and Idaho reduced grown men to tears as the emotions in the shadow of the church's steeple were overwhelming.

At that moment, Debi saw her husband begin to heal, and she knew that after Idaho returned home, they could resume their life.

Although Debi can capably convey her family's financial, physical, and emotional journey during the search for Idaho, it is impossible to guess what Idaho endured the first six months after she was loaded into a trailer and hauled away from her pasture.

While neither the Metcalfes nor anyone else will ever truly know all that Idaho suffered, she did survive. The events during that time took their toll, however. The Metcalfe's were able to gather together pieces of information about Idaho's ordeal and learned that she had suffered neglect, abuse, starvation, and sickness before being unknowingly rescued by a family with a little girl who came to love the horse she called Lucy. Had it not been for that little girl and her family, Idaho's fate still might be uncertain, as her spirit was beginning to break.

Idaho's Mission

But Idaho's story doesn't end there. The Metcalfes began to settle back into their life as it had been prior to September 26, 1997, but things had changed in expected ways. Once Idaho was home, the Metcalfes had to endure the trial and conviction of Idaho's thief. They also had to answer all the e-mails from well-wishers and curious horse owners Debi had connected with during her search for Idaho. More importantly, Debi began to reply to e-mails from victims of horse theft all over the country. These people, having heard about the Metcalfe's success in finding Idaho, wanted Debi to help them. Her unexpected quest for Idaho had eventually led to breaking the silence about horse theft and tearing down barriers so more horses could be recovered.

So Debi did the only thing she felt she could. She quit her job and established—Stolen Horse International – all because of one horse. Over the last decade, Stolen Horse International, now a nonprofit, has assisted in the recovery of hundreds of missing and stolen horses through its volunteer network known as NetPosse.

Although no official statistics are available, NetPosse works only a percentage of cases out the estimated tens of thousands of stolen horse each year – many of which are never reported to authorities. Through the network Debi has spent years establishing, a NetPosse alert, originally known as the “Idaho Alert” – the horse community's version of the Amber Alert – is distributed via the Internet to thousands of contacts and list groups in the U.S. and beyond.

Through this alert, a horse's information is distributed quickly to the public since time is of the essence in these situations. In a matter of days or even hours, a horse can be sold at multiple auctions, shipped to another state or possibly transported out of the country. This organization, motivated by this courageous horse and her dedicated family, is now the only nonprofit of its kind promoting horse theft education, prevention, and recovery.

Today, Idaho still grazes in the very pasture from which she was stolen. Occasionally, she favors a back leg, signs of the abuse she suffered a decade before. Harold sometimes observes shadows of the psychological scars carried in Idaho's soul. And, of course, she has aged, but Idaho has not lost her spirit. The Metcalfes know it is Idaho's brave spirit that brought her through the year-long ordeal and called to them over the miles and days of their search for her. It's not often that one everyday pleasure horse can inspire an international quest, but Idaho did.

BIO: Angela Kirby, an editor, graphics and Web design freelancer, has an extensive portfolio, including a cover story for *The Gaited Horse*. The executive coordinator for Stolen Horse International, she also developed security products for the nonprofit. Angela resides on a small farm in central Alabama with her family and equines. <http://www.stillwatersranch.net>

Debi and Harold Metcalfe of North Carolina established the nonprofit Stolen Horse International after the theft and recovery of Harold's horse, Idaho, in 1998. Known as NetPosse, it is the renowned source in the equine community on horse theft education. Through its volunteer network, NetPosse assists those with stolen and missing horses, tack, trailers and other farm equipment and livestock. <http://www.netposse.com>