March 2021 Jala Neufeld (by Elayne Barclay)

Spring is in the air and it is time to focus on another PNER member. This time it is finally someone who, like me, wasn't raised with horses! It is hard to believe with all her equestrian accomplishments, but Jala Neufeld did not begin riding until 2009. She started off by occasionally riding a friend's gray mare and Jala liked her so much that when her friend had to sell Country she decided to buy her even though she “didn't know anything about horses.” She set Country up at a boarding facility and commenced learning. What she failed to do was inform her husband, who was stationed overseas at the time, that she had transitioned from an occasional horseback rider to a horse owner. Jala recalls how Greg learned the truth after his return, “I showed up with a saddle and was boasting about how this was an awesome deal. He looked at me and asked 'why do you need a saddle? We don't have a horse'..... ummmm...”

There was another person at the boarding facility that had a gray Arab and one day Jala made an irreverent comment to her in true Jala style and they hit it off and became great friends. She recalls, “Nicole [Miller] and I ended up doing a lot of trail rides together and one day she asked me if I wanted to try endurance. I had no clue what I was getting into but she took me to Home on the Range and I finished my first 25 mile competition. I thought I was going to die at the end of it!” That was in 2012. She joined PNER has been competing ever since.

Jala still considers herself a “greenie”. I imagine many of us that started riding later in life like Jala can identify with her feeling of still being “very 'intimidated' by the experienced riders out there.” That hasn't stopped her from pushing the envelope of her comfort level and attempting some impressive feats. There was a Tevis completion for one (in 2017 on CH Memphis Belle). Another was delving into FEI level competitions. “I got introduced to FEI while in South Carolina. I was there for military school and was missing endurance so I called one of the ride managers that was having a ride in the area and asked if I could come volunteer.” Jala unknowingly ended up crewing for some elite riders. She recalled, “OMG what a whirlwind, they came in, equipment came off, horses cooled, heart rates checked in I swear 30 seconds and then they were gone to the vet line. I was astonished at how efficient they were. That's when I found out they were international riders and were training for an upcoming competition.” Jala was intrigued and didn't let the elite level of these competitors intimidate her, instead she “spent the rest of the weekend asking questions and learning more (keep in mind I had only done LD's to this point). We became great friends, and before I left, I was offered a horse to ride a 50 on. Really, my first 50 was on a Connemara pony at Biltmore!!!” After completing her first 50 these same friends offered her a horse to use to get qualified for the World Equestrian Games. Jala said, “knowing that WEG was coming to America I really wanted to try to get qualified myself, but also wanted to help those of us on the west coast get qualifications. I know there is a lot of "drama" with international, but in my experience I have met some wonderful, gracious people who really know how to take care of their horses.” Jala wasn't able to accomplish that goal but doesn't regret trying, “I feel honored that I was even looked at for the US endurance team (2018 WEG). I had amazing experiences crewing for the Republic of South Africa at WEG 2018. They are some GREAT people!! I still am involved with international endurance riding, I'm one of the Pac North representatives for AERC-I.

When asked about her favorite endurance memory, Jala said, “Ah, my most favorite memory is from my first 100 [it is listed on the AERC site as 105 miles!] at Sunriver [in 2016 riding Belle]. I think we had all four seasons during the ride. I woke up to iced over buckets, had big snow flakes falling, then it was so hot, then it rained. On the very last loop, my crew met me out on the trail to give me something to drink and Belle some hay. It was perfect timing because I thought I was seeing things and hearing things coming down that single track. And then coming into the finish, as we got to the bottom of the hill and turned to camp, I could see the fire, I could hear my husband, and Belle just stopped. We are like 100 meters from the finish. I thought at first it was the lights and the noise so I was urging her on and well, no, she had to pee. OMG she had to pee! Once finished she jogged right on in and it was so awesome to see so many people waiting up to see me come in (yep, I was the last one). Greg had to lift me off my horse, I think it was Darlene that put a blanket around me and handed me a hot chocolate and Greg vetted Belle for me. WAHOO WE PASSED!!! It was the most amazing feeling in the world and there were SO many people that helped me get through it. I mean really a lot of people, it was a village!”

Jala has given back to PNER by helping to manage the Creek to Capital Peak ride (with Nicole Miller), by helping other ride managers with the Ride with GPS app so riders can have electronic maps of the loops to keep on track (this is a huge benefit to ride managers and riders), and by taking stunning photographs at the rides. When asked how her ride photography started Jala said, “I have always dabbled in photography but my love is photographing endurance. I have done a couple of schooling shows [and some Equine Trail Sports events] and I will do portraits for friends and what not. I took a few classes about 5 years ago and that's when I really started to understand lighting and action and how to actually use my camera. Endurance was easy to photograph because I was always there either riding or crewing and then one day someone asked if I would be the ride photographer because the person lined up didn't show up and the rest is history. I love both aspects of riding and photographing.”

Jala was also not intimidated about starting a new career when she retired recently from the military after serving 27 years in human resources. “I have always been interested in veterinary medicine but really didn't want to go back to school to be a vet so I decided a tech would be just as good. I should graduate this June and take my national exam this fall. My goal is to be a large animal tech with an equine facility, but I love working with goats too. I have some really cool externships coming up so we shall see what I end up with after graduation!”

Like Jala, don't let your lack of decades of experience limit your dreams and goals in endurance (or life in general). You might not always succeed in achieving them, but you won't regret trying.