March 2022 Kathleen Dunham (by Elayne Barclay)

It can be hard to envision having fun when there are so many complicated issues to worry about and get in the way of your intentions: the pandemic, high fuel prices, inflation, geopolitical upheaval, etc. I was struck by the following thoughts expressed by the PNER member featured in the next focus:

“Relish the challenges involved in having a good time. Having fun is not easy and is not something that just happens to us without hard work, trials and tribulations. Usually when we have a challenge it causes us to meet new people. You never know if the person you just met might become a life long friend.” Meet a potential life long friend, Kathleen Dunham, someone that knows the effort it sometimes takes to make fun happen.

Kathleen's involvement with horses was all the fault of her parents, it wasn't even her idea! It was entirely her parent's idea that the family acquire some horses after buying 5 acres in 1979 in western Washington. They purchased a pair of TWH, which ignited Kathleen's love of horses at 2 years of age. She constantly rode their TWH mare, Missy, until she got her own horse when she was 13, an Arabian mare named Butterball. Kathleen recalled, “she was pretty green and spooked at everything. I noticed if I just galloped her everywhere she spooked less (the mail boxes and garbage cans in the neighborhood were much less scary at a faster pace - horse physiology 101).”

Surprisingly, her Arabian was not her gateway horse into the endurance world though, it was an American Paint Horse named Captain she acquired in 2000. After a few years together Kathleen came to a conclusion, “I decided our world needed to get bigger than the arena in our neighborhood and the short local trails we could ride to so I bought a crappy little trailer and started venturing out.” In 2004 she decided to volunteer with Northwest Horseback Search and Rescue in King County Washington as a fun activity to do with Captain. “The search and rescue training was tough and the horseback practical skills training was in February, March, and April in Western Washington (think cold and RAINY). I had never camped overnight with my horse before so that was a skill both of us needed to figure out. Then, as we became more experienced, the overnight portion of the training weekends was actually out in the field, not back at your truck and trailer. We would ride in groups of four on our mock search as long as we had daylight (so about 10 hours at the end of February), then we would set up camp in the woods with our little tents and feed what we brought for our horses (which wasn’t a lot!). At daybreak the next morning we would pack our gear back up on our horse and start day two of our mock search. We would ride another full day. On the second day of our first mock search the other riders told me I had a really good horse - “He is a machine!” - and that I should consider doing endurance riding with Captain.”

Kathleen wasn't familiar with endurance riding so she did some research and decided to try riding her first 50 at a local ride in 2006. That local ride has a well deserved reputation as one of the hardest rides in the PNER region: Renegade Rendezvous. To get properly prepared for this endeavor, Kathleen found a group of retired women that rode once a week. She commented, “When I say they rode, I really mean it. These ladies were TOUGH and would always choose the most challenging and technical high mountain trails. Luckily my work schedule allowed me to have the opportunity to ride weekly with this group for a few years so Captain and I came into 'Renegade' fit and up to the task. We finished that race middle of the pack in a western saddle and blue jeans. I was instantly hooked on the sport.”

Kathleen's non-equestrian life has been pretty darn full. In addition to raising a daughter, she also runs her own commercial flooring company in Seattle. She loves her work but admits, “It is a high stress job as the repercussions are serious if mistakes are made or schedules not met.” Besides this intense work environment she is also in a position of authority in a field with few women. She commented, “I have taken note that it is a 16:1 male to female ratio. If you count females that actually speak it's like 50:1. More women should get involved in construction. We definitely bring a lot to the table and our minds work in ways that see things differently and can come up with solutions that are unconventional.” Coming up with unconventional solutions has likely been a skill that has come in handy for Kathleen in her endurance riding. When asked what she is the most proud of achieving so far in endurance Kathleen mentioned several accomplishments: she completed her first 100 miler at Mt Adams in 2015 on her Morgan horse, Ohso (Doublemint Rio Gambler); in 2018 her 9 year old daughter, Nicole, and her husband, Tim, both completed their first endurance events on horses that Kathleen broke and trained; and in 2019 she completed Tevis on her first attempt on her current endurance horse, a tough little Arabian mare, WB Leyla.

Kathleen has given back to the PNER community in several ways. She has helped other endurance riders achieve completions of 25, 50, and 100 mile distances through catch riding her horses. She has been the ride manager in 2019 and 2021 for the very same ride, Renegade Rendezvous, where she completed her first 50 mile ride back in 2006! This year she is managing the Selkirk Summer Derby at Mt Spokane. She is also the current president of the Equine Distance Riding Association and is on the PNER Marketing Committee.

When asked what PNER means to her, Kathleen said, “An organization of people supporting each other, competing with each other, and HAVING FUN! I try to recruit new people to join in that fun.” As she also said though, having fun can take some work. Don't wait for fun to just happen, start planning now to make fun a reality during your ride season. Can you bring a horse or rider to ride camp to help defray fuel costs? Can you help create some fun for other endurance riders? Maybe bring treats for ride volunteers, plan a themed potluck meal with friends, add a themed riding attire accessory based on the ride's, name, date, or history, or invite someone new to join you at your camp. Joining an established PNER team or creating a new team is a great way to guarantee fun and support at rides. There is a ride scheduled for every weekend in April, I hope everyone can make it to at least one of them to ride or volunteer!