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## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

### **Back Country Horsemen of America Embraces Youth**

By Sarah Wynne Jackson

Back Country Horsemen of America recognizeS that youth are the future of our country. They wonder who will care for our wilderness and preserve American citizens' right to ride on public lands in years to come. They also know the great physical, emotional, and mental benefits they get from enjoying their horses and mules in the back country; and they want to share those joys with children.

#### **Junior BCHA**

The Junior Back Country Horsemen pilot program that began in the late 1990s didn't last long – it was quickly adopted as an official program by Back Country Horsemen of America. BCHA state organizations across the nation are also using the program as a way to get youth involved. Marsha Copeland, who is already active in youth education programs in her home state of Missouri, has recently accepted the position of Junior BCHA Chair, to put new life into this interesting program. She can be contacted at [mcope@centurytel.net](mailto:mcope@centurytel.net) or at (417) 345-5753 for further information.

Jr. BCHA began as a way to organize and educate the youth that attended BCHA meetings and activities with their parents and grandparents. In only a short period of time, it has become so much more than that.

Individuals 8 to 18 years of age gain an understanding of their legal and moral claim, as American citizens, to use horses and mules on public lands. In fact, 10-year-old Jacob Gamola recently testified in Michigan at a Senate hearing on Senate Bill 578 regarding citizens' right to ride horses on public lands.

Jr. BCHA members learn about the health and habits of horses and mules, and how to care for and use them in a humane way. They learn skills that enable them to ride and pack safely in an enclosed arena and in the backcountry.

Through experiencing America's wilderness and through hands-on education, youngsters come to care about the human impact on undeveloped lands. They also learn practical ways to minimize the impact of themselves and their animals.

#### **Not Your Usual Youth Equestrian Club**

This BCHA division offers a setting and opportunities different from other equestrian related clubs focused on young people. Adults and kids do activities together, building a deeper rapport between children and parents or grandparents. Interaction with a variety of adult BCHA members allows youth to learn valuable knowledge from experienced horsemen and horsewomen.

Jr. BCHA members learn responsibility by helping out with everyday tasks and learning to handle their horses and mules with little or no assistance. To increase their sense of accountability for their own actions, they are asked to sign a contract that requires them to behave appropriately and safely or leave the program. Older and more skilled children teach the “greenies,” expanding their skills in communication, leadership, and empathy.

All this occurs in a supportive, non-competitive family setting. The cost for membership is low and travel away from the local area is not required. In addition, Jr. BCHA membership becomes regular BCHA membership when the child turns 18. Kids age out of other youth equestrian clubs, forcing them to go it alone or create new relationships in a club for grown-ups. BCHA membership is a lifetime activity, from age 8 to 108! To find out more about the Junior BCHA program, go to [www.backcountryhorse.com](http://www.backcountryhorse.com) and access Junior BCHA under the Resources & Info tab at the top of the page.

### **Youth Ride and Leave No Trace Education**

In May 2009, Show-Me Missouri Back Country Horsemen held their first annual Youth Ride and Leave No Trace Education (LNT) Weekend. Sixteen BCH youth accompanied by parents, grandparents, or a sponsor traveled to the Big Creek Trail Ride campground. The kids attended a LNT awareness course, classes on trail ethics and basic horsemanship, and learned the ethics and purpose of Show-Me Missouri BCH.

SMMBCH is fortunate to have three Master Stock LNT Educators, all of whom attended to teach the stock (horses) part of LNT principles. Each student received their own notebook with information and puzzles on horse behavior and psychology, horsemanship, LNT principles, and much more. Skits and games illustrated some of the LNT principles. All participants, kids, and attending adults rode out for a trail ride in the morning and again in the afternoon.

LNT Master Educator Jerry Schottenhaml of SMMBCH and his wife Allison Schottenhaml, President of SMMBCH, had the opportunity to teach basic Leave No Trace principles to inner city youth in grades five, six, and seven. The children participated and sat attentively during the presentation, having been told that if they behaved, they could pat the horse in a corral nearby. Those 300 children came away from the day with a greater knowledge and a piqued curiosity about horses, nature, and our nation’s wilderness lands.

### **Developing the Whole Child**

Six-year-old Cody Hufstader is one excellent example of how participation in BCHA and riding benefits children. He started riding at six weeks of age in a backpack child carrier and rode his first mule without being led at three. By the age of five, he was taking a pack string of two animals into the back country.

Cody has passed the Oregon state hunter education course three times, successfully completing the outdoor survival class, field tests, and written test. His appreciation for the wilderness is apparent in his excellent wildlife and tracking skills, and strict adherence to Leave No Trace principles. He regularly packs out with his family and has spent two winters elk hunting, always eager to build campfires, care for the stock, and perform other “adult” tasks.

Through his back country experience, Cody has gained good common sense, an awareness of his surroundings, and the ability to put things in order. These qualities spill over into the rest of Cody’s life. He’s a good chess player, is learning sign language, and is naturally competent on a computer. His pre-school teachers are amazed at his maturity, his attentiveness to safety on the playground, and his responsibility in doing what he knows he’s supposed to do.

### **About Back Country Horsemen of America**

BCHA is a non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, and at large members. Their efforts have brought about positive changes in regards to the use of horses and stock in the wilderness and public lands.

If you want to know more about Back Country Horsemen of America or become a member, visit their website: [www.backcountryhorse.com](http://www.backcountryhorse.com), call 888-893-5161, or write PO Box 1367, Graham, WA 98338-1367. The future of horse use on public lands is in our hands!

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