

## Easton couple runs farm on horse sense

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Ask Leeland and Kirsten Gray about the horse farm they own in Easton and you'll get a thoughtful response.

"Our emphasis on mutual respect and community means there's no latitude for attitude," is how Leeland describes the relationship between horse and rider at Gray Friesian Farm. "It's a healthy environment for both people and animals. We may be at different levels here, but we're all moving together."

Riders of all ages seeking to celebrate a sunny summer day on horseback gathered recently at the Eden Hill Road farm to see its expanded facilities, approved in the spring by the Easton Planning and Zoning Commission.

"While we do have several talented riders, some competing in shows, we are not a show barn," said Kirsten Gray, a riding instructor who runs the farm with her husband. "We offer riders an opportunity to learn with their horses in an environment of mutual respect."

Gray and her husband said riders of all ages and abilities participate in learning about and working with horses at their farm.

The 37-acre farm, featuring trails and riding rings, is named after the Friesian breed of horse. The farm has five of these horses the Grays imported from Europe.

Kirsten Gray said the breed originated in Friesland, a province of the Netherlands on the North Sea, where it gained a reputation for its usefulness in war and pulling carriages in the late 18th century.

"The horses are totally black, famous for hair on their feet, long manes and full tails," Gray said.

She said she first was impressed with the Friesians by their appearance, but later wanted some for her farm because of their personality and temperament.

"The Friesians have a good, even temperament. They love people and want to please them on the saddle and in everyday life," she said. "They are patient with riders and good communicators."

Riders at the farm have access to a trail that runs down to Poverty Hollow Road in Redding, where they can enter Huntington State Park, with trails through pristine woodland.

Farm patrons, who own and board a horse or lease one, may participate in Sunday morning trail rides.

They may also learn or refine skills in dressage, a method of communication between them and their horses.

Gray said dressage is an alternative to riding styles offered at other stables in town, such as hunter-jumper at Lion Hill or western at Pee Wee Farm, both on Sport Hill Road.

"In dressage, everything you do with your body means something to the horse – how you sit in the saddle, use your legs or hold the reins," she said. "There's no racing or jumping. It's all detailed flat work."



Caroline Meroz, of Wilton, bonds with her horse, Layla Blue, during a riding session at Gray Friesian Farm in Easton. Owned by Kristen and Lee Gray, the farm offers classical dressage training and over 37 acres of fields and trails. (Jesse Neider/Staff photographer)

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The work is also directed toward improving the horse's physical condition, she said, because horses, like humans, have a mix of strengths and weaknesses.

Gray's daughter, Jannike, 14, who's been riding since she was 4, instructs young children and competes in dressage at events from April through September in Connecticut and New York.

Gray's younger daughter, Jettke, 7, has also learned to ride, while her son, Jarrett, 12, who has an allergy to horses, helps his father maintain the farm.

Students from age 5 to adult may use or lease one of the farm's 13 horses – including the five Friesians – or they may board or bring their own.

These horses are among about 190 in Easton owned by various farms, stables or individuals, town Assessor Teresa Rainieri said.

According to a study done by Deloitte Consulting released in June 2005 by the American Horse Council, there were 51,968 horses in Connecticut.

A study done by the University of Connecticut's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources in 2006 determined Fairfield County has about 14 percent of the state's horses. Litchfield County had the highest percentage, nearly 20 percent. New Haven County has just under 14 percent.

Dylan Kurzer, an adult rider from Westport at Gray Friesian Farm, said she rides Hailey, a horse Kirsten Gray "rescued" from a prior owner who had not fed it properly.

The horse, now fit, had been "skin and bones," about 150 pounds underweight, Gray said.

Kate Remington, of Shelton, who has been riding horses for 20 years, leases Tonka, an 8-year-old gelding owned by the farm.

"I love the bond I can get with a horse. Every horse has a personality," Remington said. "The first ride is like a blind date. You don't know how it is going to go."

Gray said she tries to match a horse with a rider to develop a good relationship.

"Some people ride for pleasure and others for competition," she said. "We ride our horses at least once a week so that their riders can more easily learn the dressage commands on them."

Younger riders may earn credit for lessons by helping maintain the farm horses.

"I give them Friesian dollars I print out and they use them to pay for lessons. They get a direct reward for what they do," Gray said.

Gray said she opened the farm in 2005, offering dressage training and boarding.

It began to attract serious riders, she said, after she invited European trainers to give classes. Among them is Katja Bluhm, of Germany, who will lead a clinic Aug. 17.



Kate Remington, of Shelton, works on Lunging Idsy, a process in which a line is used to circle the horse in order to build muscle and practice proper form at the Gray Friesian Farm in Easton. Owned by Kristen and Lee Gray, the farm offers classical dressage training and over 37 acres of fields and trails. (Jesse Neider/Staff photographer)

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Gray said she has connections to such high level horse experts because she was born in Hamburg, Germany, and grew up with horses in the nearby town of Norderstedt.

"My cousin and my grandmother introduced me to horses. I started riding at 5," said Gray, 46. "I loved the horses. They were great friends and companions."

She said she first was involved in jumping with horses in Europe, but gradually turned to dressage.

After moving to Norwalk a number of years ago while working for a German company, she met Leeland Gray and they became a couple.

As a result of Kirsten Gray's passion for horses, the community's interest in the farm grew to the point that it had to enlarge its facilities, Leeland Gray said.

During a series of hearings and meetings with the Planning and Zoning Commission in the spring, Gray said he gained permission to replace a barn with a new one containing nine stalls as well as double the size of an indoor riding ring to 120-feet by 60-feet.

The Grays purchased the farm in 2004 after its prior owner, Elinore Palmer, decided to move.

"Elinore wanted this place to remain a farm," Kirsten Gray said. "She had horses here when she was younger. Her dream was to see horses again in the field. We are very grateful to her for trusting us with this piece of property."