

Technique *trumps* Brawn

Cathy Lesperance has helped open doors for other women in the male-dominated world of shoeing horses

BY VALERIE HILL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BEBEE

A career in the rough and grimy business of shoeing horses is not about brawn, but it's also not about having pretty fingernails.

The latter was a concern when Cathy Lesperance first explored her interest in being a farrier. Just how feminine could she be in this male-dominated trade, where she would be hoisting the legs of contrary horses, lifting metal anvils, heating and thumping iron shoes into submission, all while wearing a not-so-stylish leather apron, jeans and "big and ugly" steel-toed boots.

"I wanted to remain very female and very capable – I didn't want to lose that part of me," says Lesperance, who had been

Farrier Cathy Lesperance with a horse she shod at Sunrise Therapeutic Riding & Learning Centre in Puslinch.



interested in the girly pleasures of life as a teenager, such as makeup and clothes.

"I gave that up, too much work putting on nail polish all the time," she says with a laugh.

Lesperance, now 55, settled on a happy medium while leading the way in modern shoeing methods and acting as a role model for other women thinking of entering the trade. Being a good farrier is not about physical strength, she tells them. No human can out-wrestle a horse anyway, so women have to rely on knowledge and technique.

"Young women want to know what it's like physically, if they can do it," says Lesperance, now in her 36th year as a farrier. "I'd like to think I opened some doors."

Lesperance lives in a sprawling bungalow in Fergus, the double driveway big enough to accommodate her huge pickup truck and trailer, a unit that holds all her tools of the

trade including a propane forge that reaches temperatures of 1,316 Celsius.

Having everything in a trailer has lightened her load a bit. She doesn't have to haul a 57-kilogram anvil or tool box filled with horseshoes and nails from the back of her pickup truck to the barn anymore. It's still a very physical job and her wiry, muscular frame is evidence of a long career.

Her constant smile is evidence that every day is heaven for this horse-loving woman.

"My passion for horses started when I was little – I loved horses," says Lesperance who grew up just outside Elmira and got her first horse as a teenager.

"We took our horses to a Mennonite farrier and I watched him as he shod the horses; I was fascinated."

Though the thought of becoming a farrier

was intriguing, there were only a handful of established female farriers across Canada and none locally.

After high school, Lesperance considered a career in accounting, maybe psychology, but the idea of being a farrier just wouldn't stop seeping into her dreams. Then an opportunity presented itself. Or rather, she created the opportunity.

The first step in becoming a farrier was to apprentice and that was a problem because all the farriers in this area were married men.

"Their wives didn't want their husbands riding around in a truck all day with an 18-year-old girl," she says.

Then she found an opportunity with a Guelph farrier. He didn't want to take her on either, but his wife insisted, and he finally agreed. Lesperance would be his last apprentice after a long career and she says he didn't make it easy for her.

The nine months Lesperance worked with him turned out to be nine unproductive months, but it was enough to make her think there was only one solution.

"I went out on my own after that," she says. "It was disastrous. I knew enough to be dangerous."

"The first horse I shod on my own I made a mess of and the client fired me," she says.

The client happened to be her sister. It was hurtful but a realism Lesperance had to face. Shoeing horses was serious business with serious consequences. A bad shoeing job could lead to lameness and no owner would allow that.

"Then I met Larry," she says.

Larry Lesperance, one of the most respected farriers and horsemen in the province, had grown up on a ranch and became Ontario's version of the horse whisperer. He understood how a horse's

mind works and had a deep understanding of the horse's physical structure.

Their relationship started out as romantic before it became professional.

"Larry and I started dating, and one day he was tired, and he asked me to shoe a horse," she says.

She did so under Larry's watchful eye and from that day on they became a working team with Lesperance soaking up all the knowledge and experience her soon-to-be husband was eager to share.

"I learned a lot from him, but he wanted to get out of the business that I wanted to get into," she says.

For the next six years Larry taught her everything he knew, about the dynamics of shoeing, how to handle horses that have personalities as different from each other as humans, how to fabricate and adjust metal shoes as well as the physiology of a horse's

leg. Racehorses need different shoes than jumpers or horses that don't do anything more athletic than walking a trail.

Larry's new dream was to operate a home for young male offenders, boys who needed a strong male influence, which he successfully ran for several years. Larry, also a singer/songwriter, made his mark and was honoured with a WOW the World Waterloo Region award in 2016.

The couple eventually divorced but remain friends. Lesperance's current partner, Rene Pulles, is a non-horsey guy who obviously adores his hard-working spouse, making sure she is pampered with her favourite drink, popcorn and a movie at the end of a tough week.

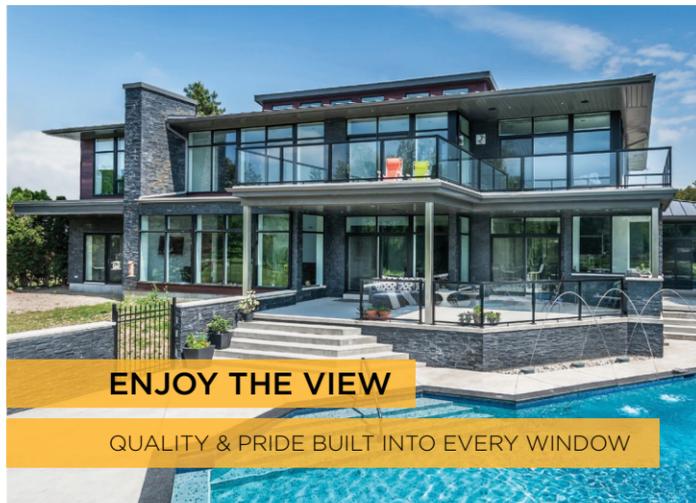
Working with Larry for so long, Lesperance believes she had "a fantastic foundation" to finally start on her own.

Today, Lesperance has about 30 regular

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clients, including some of the multimillion-dollar show-jumping stables in and around Caledon. She recently travelled with one of those stables to Spruce Meadows, Alta., to the country's most prestigious national equestrian events.

Shoeing horses of this calibre, horses worth a few hundred thousand dollars, requires very specific skills. For Lesperance, it's been both an honour and a challenge.

Only once in her long career has that challenge nearly cost Lesperance her life.

In January 1999, she was called to shoe a new horse, one of those high-spirited show jumpers with a bad attitude.

The owner had put the horse in a standing stall and walked away. Lesperance came in beside the horse and had just put her tool box on the floor beside him. That

slight clunk of wood on concrete set him off and he was suddenly all slashing hooves and biting teeth. This wasn't fear, a mere spooking at a noise. The horse's reaction was a mad, vengeful craze and Lesperance was his target.

"He snapped when he saw me," she says. "The first blow got me in the thigh and I crumpled to the ground. He kicked me in the head. I needed 20 stitches."

Everybody was screaming about how to get the horse to stop kicking when Lesperance's apprentice, a woman named Lee Taylor, reached in and grabbed her. Had Taylor not acted, "it would have been much worse."

It would take months for Lesperance to fully recover from smashed ribs and a body full of bruises. Weeks later she learned her back had also been broken. None of this stopped her. When you are self-employed,

there are no options: don't work, don't earn money.

"What scared me the most was thinking: I'm hurt, can I do this?"

She has met others who went through similar circumstances, amazingly stoic people.

"You have to be," she says.

There was another incident where it was Lesperance who became the hero.

"I have dragged somebody out from under a horse," she says. "It was a young stallion and he was rearing up and stomping on her, got her in the face."

"I found that really traumatic, but you don't often see horses going after and attacking human beings."

"The one that attacked me, he'd never done it before, but his behaviour had been escalating when I met him."

For the most part, Lesperance has learned

and taught her own apprentices that they must first and foremost understand equine behaviour, see the warning signs and act accordingly.

"Horses have the same traits as people," she says. "Some are thoughtless, unkind, sociopaths; then you get the sweet and kind type that would buy you flowers or write you a thank-you note."

That would be the gentle horses at Sunrise Therapeutic Riding & Learning Centre, a facility east of Cambridge that operates as a charity and provides everything from life-skills training to therapeutic riding for adults and children with special needs.

"Sunrise came about eight years ago, when they were looking for a farrier," says Lesperance. She wanted to recruit other volunteer farriers who would show up once every six weeks and take care of the horses'

feet, whether the animals need shoes or just a hoof trim.

"I was certain I could put together a team of four big-hearted farriers," says Lesperance, and she was right: Michele MacRae, Garry Barnim, Tristan Miles and Paul Fischbach all came on board.

On a bright May morning, Lesperance and the other farriers pulled into the spotless barnyard at Sunrise, eager to get on with the business of caring for the centre's horses and ponies. There is a wonderful mixture of equines in this barn, everything from appaloosa horses to stubby-legged ponies. And no barn is complete without a braying donkey for comic relief.

Each equine at the farm has been chosen for its unwavering gentleness and patience – one of those horses that would send you flowers if it could. The sweet temperaments

make the farriers' job more pleasant as the horses simply stand patiently, like ladies at a nail spa waiting for a little buff and polish.

"We save them (Sunrise) \$12,000 a year," says Lesperance. "And it's fun to do this all together. We don't get to work together often."

Today, Lesperance has her own apprentice, Arden Nagy of Orangeville, a young woman she hopes will stick with her for at least five years.

"There is a lot to learn," she says. "She can get a ton of hands-on experience, learn the physical, biological understanding of horse anatomy and the bio mechanics, what's required of the horse: is it a jumper, a race horse?"

Luckily for young Nagy, there is much better education available today and people like Lesperance are willing to take on young

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On a recent visit to Sunrise Therapeutic Riding & Learning Centre in Puslinch, farrier Cathy Lesperance was busy shoeing horses and making use of an oven inside her custom-made mobile trailer.

women as apprentices, having paved the way over nearly four decades.

“I had lots of people tell me: ‘You don’t want to do that, it’ll ruin your back, that’s a guy’s job,’” says Nagy, now entering her second year working with Lesperance.

Two years ago Nagy applied at Olds College in Alberta and was surprised her farrier science class consisted of 10 females and only four males. Then, after graduating, Nagy was introduced to Lesperance, the role model she was looking for.

“Cathy’s not a feminist,” Nagy says. “She just knows what she wants and sets her mind to it. She had it rough in the beginning and had to learn all these things the hard way.”

Now that female farriers are becoming more common, Nagy says many clients, particularly other women, prefer them.

Female farriers tend to be smaller “so we can squish under a horse and not have to pull its leg outwards,” she says. Female farriers are also thought to be more gentle and patient.

“Cathy set the path for us,” Nagy says, noting her role model is very patient, never getting angry at a mistake and she is always eager to adapt to new shoeing practices, such as glue on shoes, which replaces nailed shoes for horses with sensitive feet.

Lesperance is also setting the path for women farriers across North America, through various associations, most recently as vice-president of the nascent American Association of Professional Farriers.

Though there are other Canadians on the organization’s board, Lesperance is the only female, so she knows that despite the inroads women have made in the industry, there is still a ways to go.

“I hope I have been inspiring,” says Lesperance.

Nagy concludes: “Cathy has been everyone’s hero at some point.”

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