



‘Horse-crazy gal’

“I’ve always been kind of a horse-crazy gal,” Turners Falls, MA Branch 1614 member **Stefanie Sibley** says.

When Sibley’s family moved in 1998 to a home across the street from a woman who bred Morgan horses, the young girl quickly took on a new hobby. The neighbor did all of her own horse training, and Sibley learned from her.

“It started with grooming, then cleaning after them,” Sibley said. The neighbor didn’t have any rideable horses because they were either too young or not yet trained, so she told Sibley, “We’ll have to make one for you.”

Sibley spent 15 years, from middle school into adulthood, training horses with her neighbor. Even after she began her job as a letter carrier, Sibley still rode there nearly every day after work. When Sibley’s friend died, she left the carrier her prized stallion, which was the first horse Sibley owned. She now has three.

“You start with groundwork and ba-

sic handling,” trying to get to a basic comfort level with each other, Sibley said, adding that each horse’s personality is different. She gradually adds equipment, including a bit and saddle, and teaches

the horses skills such as responding to commands and lunging—a way for trainers to help their horses burn off energy without riding them, and also a way to improve communication by teaching verbal cues to move forward and backward.

“I think horses have a great way of grounding you,” she said. “Taking care of them every day can be humbling and therapeutic. It doesn’t feel like work to me.”

The Morgan horse breed originated in New England in the late 18th century and was among the first horse breeds developed in the United States. Known for their beauty and stamina, the horses often are sought for breeding.

“What draws me to [Morgan] horses is that they are a good family horse,” Sibley said, adding that “it’s a horse everyone can enjoy—energetic enough for adults to enjoy and safe enough to take the smallest kids around the ring. The foundation stallion of the breed was known for working the farm, taking the family to church and still having enough energy to race on

the weekends.”

The carrier now has a trio of Morgan horses—their barn names are Fusion, Stella and Rebel. The three horses also have registered names with the American Morgan Horse Association that are used for shows.

Sibley keeps Fusion with her at home, and the other two are boarded at a farm in New Hampshire, just over the state line from Massachusetts.

“I live on a hilly property, not conducive to riding,” she said, adding, “I go over to New Hampshire twice a day to feed and train them and work them.”

Though she has shown all of her horses, the carrier has been focusing on Stella and set a goal of two shows for her this year. Sibley has trained the horse since she was born five years ago, but she’s been under saddle for less than a year. “She’s taken it in stride. I’m very proud of her,” Sibley said.

She also has done some horse breeding, though not in recent years. She started because she wanted a new show horse. “I wanted it to be more personal and more hands-on,” she said.

The carrier now plans to show Stella for a few years, then breed her.

Sibley has carried mail on and off over the past 13 years, first serving as a transitional employee before taking a break and returning as the then-newly created position of city carrier assistant in 2014. She was converted to regular the following year.

She tries to be with her horses whenever she can. “With the Postal Service, it’s hard to get time off,” she said. While some in the sport hire someone else to train their horses

Previous page: Sibley rides her mare, Stella, in competition

Right: The carrier competes with her first Morgan horse, stallion Randallane Genesis

six days a week, the carrier says she enjoys doing all of the work herself.

And practice makes perfect. "I've always had the frame of mind that even though I'm an amateur trainer and shower, I don't want to appear to be an amateur," she said.

Sibley said she's lucky to live near show grounds in New Hampshire. The show season generally begins in April, though due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been some major adjustments to the schedule this year.

Some events have been canceled, and the first show she was planning to enter in May in Deerfield, NH, was postponed to July.

"They do have some strict protocols for COVID" in place, Sibley said, including riders and spectators wearing masks all the time (except if riding a horse), everyone keeping at least two seats apart, having no gatherings and canceling exhibitor parties.

"It's definitely been different," she said, but "at the end of the day, we're just trying to get these horses we've worked so hard with, out [there] competing."

Sibley had been waiting to see if she was going to the world championships in Oklahoma City in October, but ultimately the carrier and her travel companions made the decision not to attend. "The travel restrictions for Massachusetts and New Hampshire would have been a little difficult for everyone upon return," she said.

Typically, the shows she competes in through the United Professional Horsemen's Association and the United States Equestrian Federation are a week long, and divisions where horses are shown are spread throughout that time frame.

On Monday, participants usually set up their stalls and let their horses get used to the stables and settle in for a day or so. By Wednesday, Sibley says, there are perhaps two classes, one in the morning and one in the evening. Classes are a series of performances



where horses with similar characteristics compete against one another.

"When you show, you go into preliminary classes," she said, adding, it's "a lot of 'hurry up and wait.'"

Higher classes tend to be scheduled later in the week, and the types of awards to be earned depend on the show. "They pin you per class," Sibley said of how winning competitors receive recognition.

The carrier says that her fellow letter carriers certainly know about her hobby, and some have even tuned in to her horse shows online through live feeds.

"I've always loved competing," Sibley said. "It's a personal drive." Competition can be very stiff, the carrier said, adding that external factors such as judging preferences play a role. Or, she added, "you could simply be having a bad day."

"When you win or place well, it's that much more rewarding," Sibley said.

The carrier clearly loves horses and enjoys the whole process of training and showing them. "I've never been the type of person that gets hung up on the type of ribbon," she said.

Rather, Sibley says, she just wants to "be better than the last ride." **PR**

Sibley with her niece

