

Gypsy's Gift: the Moon and More



How an amazing pony has helped her rider survive a devastating illness throughout twenty years of companionship.

by Erin Rankin

“In riding a horse we borrow freedom”

~ Helen Thomson

When Alex Pangman, 33, found her mother's riding helmet, she had no idea how much it would change her life. Only 10 years old at the time, Pangman knew she'd have an uphill battle convincing her mom to let her ride. But uphill battles were something she had become accustomed to during her short life. While most other children her age ran around whooping and hollering, she was used to paying for this privilege by enduring grueling sessions of chest-pounding physiotherapy to make sure she coughed up enough phlegm to allow her to breathe.

The second of two children to Connie and John Pangman, Alex was born with cystic fibrosis. The most common fatal inherited disease in Canada, it affects about one in every 3,600 infants. Diagnosed as a baby, Pangman was chronically ill with chest colds and simply failed to thrive and grow like other babies. Treating children and adults with cystic fibrosis revolves around a daily routine of keeping the lungs mucus free and maintaining good health. This means a diet of ventilators, pills and trips to physiotherapists. In her earliest years, this routine worked well for Pangman, but when she reached her tenth year, she began to experience severe bleeding from the physical treatment and began coughing up a lot of blood. Because Pangman's life depended on getting the phlegm out her lungs, an alternative therapy had to be found.

Having a mother and a grandmother who both rode horses, Pangman gravitated naturally to riding. With quite a bit of pleading peppered with some nagging, Pangman found herself in the saddle under the tutelage of long-time hunter coach Sue Pritchard. She describes her first experience as “joyful.” Best of all, says Pangman she was like any other child as she galloped around and jumped fences. Riding proved to be effective treatment for clearing Pangman's lungs, jostling her around just enough to get the excess mucus out, but not too much to cause bleeding. Within a year Pangman was part-boarding a pony but wishing for her own. It

was time for her to meet a little mare that would change her life and become her best friend.

The Pangmans asked Alex's then riding coach Mary Courtney to search out a mount for Alex. “I remember Mary's words clearly. She said, ‘I'll find you a pony.’ And she did,” laughs Pangman. Within a week, two ponies were brought to the farm on trial. Pangman was there as the ponies came off the trailer. “There was the most beautiful black pony I'd ever seen. I was mesmerized,” she said. The other pony was Gypsy, a liver chestnut Welsh-Arab cross, wild-eyed and nervous.

“Of course, I wanted to ride the black pony so I asked my friend Dianne Flynn to ride Gypsy. The black pony had a strange gait that I didn't like,” recalled Pangman. Famous for taking long spots, Gypsy parted ways with Dianne at the first fence. “My mother said, ‘there's no way you're getting on that pony.’” But Pangman did. After an initial argument over a

puddle (Gypsy thought she would go around, Pangman insisted she go through) the two bonded quickly. The one-week trial period was redundant since Pangman said she knew Gypsy was the only pony for her.

Although Gypsy was never the fanciest pony, she proved among the most steadfast. Pangman remembers being on course at a show when her pony gently broke to trot, then a walk, and then glided to a halt. Pangman said at the time she was wondering what the heck her pony was doing, but within seconds Pangman began having a coughing fit so violent she was choking up blood everywhere. Gypsy stood quietly and waited. "I don't know how Gypsy knew. She just knew," said Pangman.

Gypsy's biggest test was yet to come. Like most young people with cystic fibrosis, Pangman and her family quietly managed her illness throughout her childhood and adolescence. "I never really thought I was special or different," said Pangman. "Maybe cystic fibrosis is a bit like smoking. You know it

will eventually shorten your life but it's down the road so you don't think too much about the future." As she advanced through her twenties, Pangman's lungs began to rapidly deteriorate. She remained focused on her three loves: Gypsy, a career as a jazz vocalist and the love of her life, Tom Parker.

After 10 years of riding competitively, Pangman says she decided to shelve the show scene. "I was tired of riding in circles," she said. So rather than trading up to a horse, she decided to keep her large pony and focus on trail riding and having fun. It was a transition that proved most agreeable to Gypsy. "I've always had to ride her with a big pair spurs

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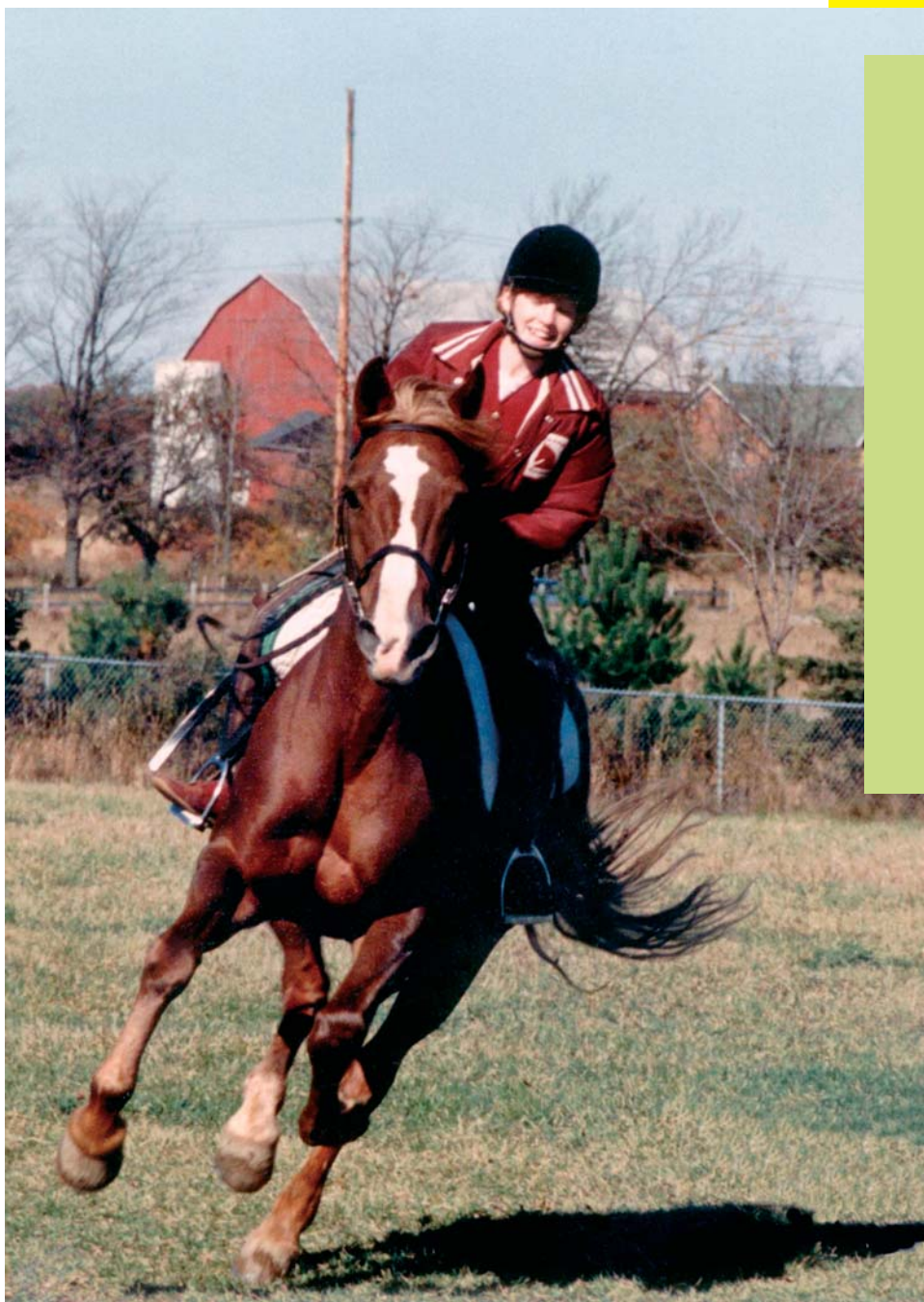
and loose snaffle in the ring. But on the trail I need a kimberwick to slow her down.”

It was also through Gypsy that Pangman found her second love: singing 1930s jazz. “I was sitting on hay bales playing my guitar and singing ‘Stewball Was a Race Horse’ to her when I met up with a friend who introduced me to jazz.” Through singing, Pangman met her third love and now husband. Married in 2006, she and Parker, a mandolin player and kindergarten music teacher, were introduced during one of his gigs at the Cameron House in Toronto. Despite a goofy Halloween costume, Pangman said she got to talking to him during break and they immediately hit it off.

Although Pangman’s life was unfolding professionally and personally, physically she was at the end of the road and facing the final step in cystic fibrosis: a lung transplant. Pangman admits even the initial thought was hard. “My doctor told me that without a transplant I had less than a 50 per cent chance of living another two years. Then he told me I had a 50 per cent chance of surviving the lung transplant.”

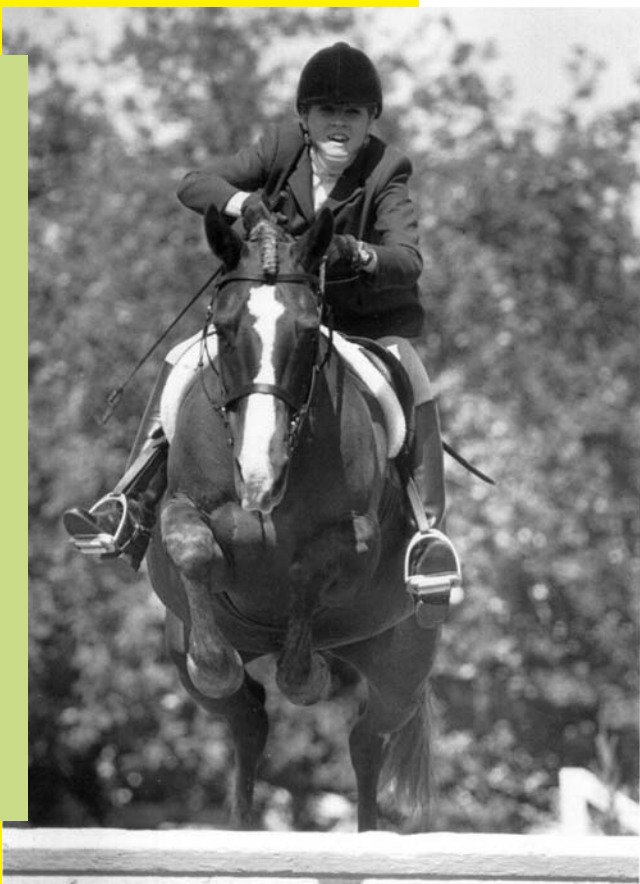
Pangman was given a beeper and went on waiting list. As her lung capacity dropped below 50 per cent, her once-active life faded into a routine of breathless exhaustion. Even simple things like getting out of bed took work and determination. Singing became impossible. But riding became essential. Gypsy remained Pangman’s lifeline to help clear her failing lungs. Fitted with a special saddle pad, the pony carried her rider and oxygen tanks. For Pangman, riding was excruciating. Her time in the tack was measured by how much oxygen she used: 30 minutes was one tank. Every lap of the arena required Pangman to turn into the middle and rest. While she gasped for air and fiddled with rubber hoses, Gypsy stood quietly waiting.

As the summer of 2008 approached,



Pangman continued to hack out on the days she felt well enough; but only ever at a walk. She would lean over Gypsy’s neck and apologize for their slow progress. “I would say to her, ‘maybe one day we’ll be able to gallop again,’” said Pangman.

Then on November 4, 2008, Pangman’s pager went off. After an eight-hour surgery, she had two new lungs by 1:00 p.m. the same day. After three months of rehabilitation, she could finally start riding again. “I walked up to the mounting block, put my foot in the stirrup and swung myself into the tack. I was grinning and tearing up. I went for a trot and was out breath and panicked a little, but



then I realized I already had my breath. My lungs didn't feel like they were going to implode. It dawned on me that I was out of breath simply because I was out of shape. It was a surreal moment."

While it's been almost a year, Pangman continues to pick up with her life where she left off. She and Tom both ride now and she has begun to sing again. Her new lungs should see her through many decades, as people who receive transplants routinely live more than 20 years. In her pensive moments, Pangman says she can't help but wonder about the person whose lungs she has. "When I ride I often think that these are a darn good set of lungs. Then I wonder if they've ever jumped before. Mostly, I find myself thanking the person over and over for their gift of life."

She also thanks Gypsy. At 32 years of age, fiery little Gypsy's years have fallen gracefully upon her. Other than a little grey around her eyes, one might think she was still a young pony and, true to her namesake, she loves nothing better than a good wander over hill and dale. Pangman couldn't imagine life without her. "Mary once said to me, 'This pony will give you the moon if you let her.' And she has. She gave me legs, she gave me breath and she gave me my life, but most of all she gave me freedom." 🐾