

Epona Center

The New Pioneering Spirit at Historic Apache Springs Ranch

Photos for this article were taken by
Kevin Anderson, Maureen Luikart,
Rita Dulaney, Kathleen Ingram and Steve Roach.



Epona's eleventh apprenticeship class, with students from across the U.S., Canada, France, Holland, South Africa and New Zealand, learn to incorporate horses into their counseling, life coaching and executive training programs.

The pioneering spirit is alive and well at Apache Springs Ranch. Settled in the late 1800s by Tom Gardner, this historic Sonoita oasis is surrounded by miles of national forest, preserving the stunning natural beauty of land once roamed by Cochise and his warriors: high desert grasslands laced with towering sycamores and cottonwoods, red rock canyons, waterfalls, and miles of trails meandering through the Santa Rita Mountains.

In 1888, *The Arizona Daily Citizen* called Gardner "one of the most original characters to be found anywhere in the Western country." A tough, rambunctious, well-liked entrepreneur, cattle rancher and horse racer, he was the first white settler in the region. This was no minor accomplishment considering that he was mauled by a bear and shot by Cochise in the process - and stubbornly lived on for many years to tell about it. After his death in 1906, Apache Springs hosted a variety of private cattle ranching and horse training operations as the tempestuous Indian wars that Gardner dealt with daily gave way to an increasing sense of peace and tranquility. Finally, in 2005, the ranch opened its doors to the public, as the Epona International Study Center and Equestrian Retreat made its home in scenic Gardner Canyon, attracting people from around the world to a whole new era of discovery.



East pastures leading into the conference center.

The Epona Center has emerged as one of the leaders in Equine-Facilitated Human Development, an innovative, fast growing discipline in which horses are employed in teaching people leadership, assertiveness, personal empowerment, mindfulness, relationship, creativity and emotional fitness skills. At the same time, Epona has received international attention for horse training, breeding and stallion socialization innovations. Amateur and professional equestrians, teachers, therapists, artists, business leaders and human/animal consciousness researchers from around the world attend workshops, retreats and private sessions with the Epona herd.

Originally founded in Tucson in 1997 by author and horse trainer Linda Kohanov, Epona Equestrian Services, a collective of horse professionals, educators, life coaches and counselors, has since expanded to include nearly 150 Epona Approved Instructors worldwide who actively explore the healing potential of the horse-human bond. Located throughout Arizona and across six continents, these professionals gain the distinction by attending the five-week Epona Apprenticeship Program.

A HIGH DESERT OASIS

The new Epona Center at Apache Springs Ranch is a worthy international headquarters. At 5000 feet, this equestrian-oriented retreat offers a convenient respite from the summer heat as temperatures are a good 15 degrees below those of Tucson and Phoenix. At the height of the monsoon season, the ranch - with its natural spring, fruit trees, rich green pastures and massive cottonwoods - looks more like Ireland than Arizona.

Attached to a covered riding arena, the air-conditioned conference center features a meeting room comfortably



A natural Spring and flowering fruit trees create an oasis in the desert.



Left to right, stallion Merlin and his mares Comet and Rasa.

seating up to 50 people, high speed wireless internet service, audio and visual options, a commercial kitchen and cantina, massage studio, offices and gift shop. Horse facilities also include a large roping arena, numerous round pens, stalls, outdoor corrals with shades and acres of pastures. Beyond the extensive indoor amenities, regional saddle clubs sometimes set up weeklong horse trailer camps at the ranch. Located a mere quarter mile from the Arizona Trail, Apache Springs provides the perfect launching point for stunning rides through Gardner Canyon and the Santa Rita Mountains beyond.

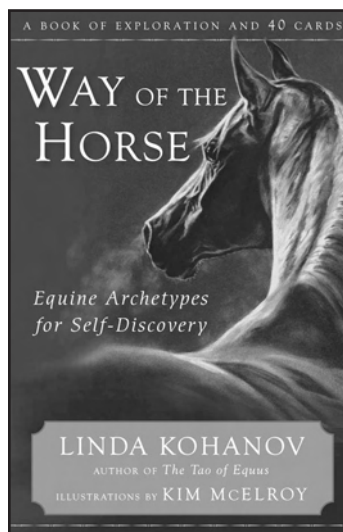
On site accommodations for people include Tom Gardner's original ranch house, remodeled over the years to include all modern conveniences, accommodating up to six adults comfortably. The guest wing, a tastefully converted barn, features six serene, private guest rooms, a kitchenette and a spacious lounge with views of horses peacefully grazing in the shadow of Mt. Wrightson, Southern Arizona's highest peak. For those on a budget, there's a rustic bunk house with a small kitchen and private bath.

During workshops and special events, however, there's no reason to pull out those pots and pans as the Epona Cantina serves up sumptuous nutritious meals. Chef Art Donatelli's daily menus include such delicacies as grilled salmon, crab cakes, roast duck, mahi vera cruz, scallops in garlic cream sauce over pasta or spaghetti squash, and filet mignon in port wine sauce. Tasty organic chicken and vegetarian dishes are also available. Workshop tuition most often includes meals and lodging, offering plenty of time and space for personal reflection, hiking, yoga, massage, trail riding and private lessons - beyond the engaging, life-enhancing lectures, discussions, expressive arts and horse activities that may be a part of the day's scheduled activities. Equestrians are invited to bring their own horses, or work with members of the Epona herd.

FOUR LEGGED PROFESSORS

Over the years, in fact, many people have expressed a desire to meet the "main characters" of Linda Kohanov's bestselling books. Merlin, Comet and Rasa are among those horses who introduced readers to an expanded understanding of equine intelligence, while helping thousands of clients come to a deeper recognition of human potential.

It all started when the nationally-recognized music critic, former KUAT-FM classical announcer, and *Tucson Weekly* columnist wrote the now-classic book *The Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey of Healing and Transformation through the Way of the Horse*. Named one of the top books of 2001 by Amazon.com, it received appreciative reviews in publications as diverse as *Horse and Rider*, *Natural Horse*, *IONS Noetic Sciences Review*, *Spirituality and Health* and *Strides*. Her second book, *Riding Between the Worlds: Expanding Our Potential through the Way of the Horse*, was published in November 2003 and also received excellent reviews. These titles have since been translated into French, German and Dutch and are used as texts at universities.



Linda Kohanov's latest project, Way of the Horse: Equine Archetypes for Self-Discovery is a collaboration with equine artist, Kim McElroy.



*"RASA DANCE"
Equine artist
Kim McElroy's
depiction of
Linda dancing
with her
Arabian mare,
Rasa.*

Her latest project, *Way of the Horse: Equine Archetypes for Self Discovery*, a 2007 collaboration with noted Seattle-based equine artist Kim McElroy, is designed to take horse wisdom into the home, the workplace, schools and other human environments, offering equine-inspired insights on relationship, non-verbal communication, leadership, creativity, power, authenticity and balance. The package features a full-length book and a deck of horse cards with original artwork, several images depicting members of the Epona herd.

"I'm still a bit stunned at the success of these titles," Kohanov says, "and of their ability to inspire people to jump on a plane and travel to Sonoita."

Obviously, her keen storytelling instincts and richly nuanced writing struck a chord. But when Kohanov began researching *The Tao of Equus* as an apprentice trainer in 1994, she admits to feeling intensely alone. "My horses were awakening something in me, something profound and, at that time, indescribable," she reveals. "I was learning how to ride, breed and start horses under saddle at a variety of regional farms and training facilities, a longtime interest of mine. Yet I was also a bit of an iconoclast because I was in my 30s, and already had successful careers in the highly competitive worlds of music, radio and print journalism. My music background trained me to tune into the nonverbal dimensions of human experience, and I was both shocked and thrilled to find that the horses were taking me to a whole new level of sensitivity and creativity. I struggled for years to put these mysterious feelings and insights into words, and some of my trainers weren't especially thrilled when I began to challenge our most basic assumptions about the horse-human bond as a result of my research.

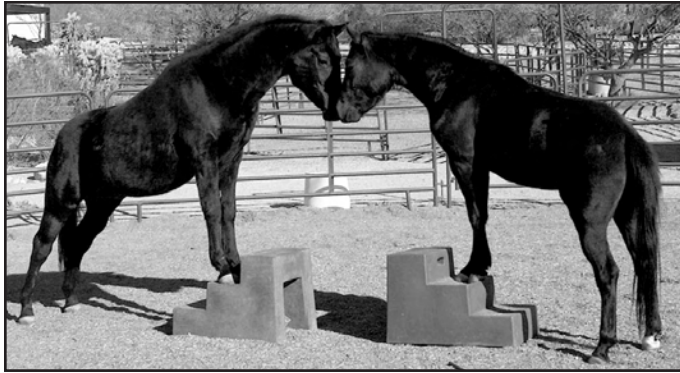
"Still, I could see these animals were having a life-changing effect on other people, too. At that time, however, equestrians couldn't really talk about these

experiences without sounding far too emotional or mystical - and vague, always much too vague. So we chattered incessantly about the surface of all things equine: tack, breeds, training methods, lameness issues, therapeutic options, conformation and competition. Over time, many of us became distracted by those details, losing connection to the powerful yet ever elusive spirit of the horse that drew us to the barn in the first place. As a result, we felt betrayed and frustrated at times, yet we were unable to describe why without sounding whimsical, unrealistic, and frighteningly, embarrassingly, irrational. How does the average riding student or instructor express, in polite conversation, that she found her soul in the eyes of a horse, only to lose it in the business of training and competing? What happens when she consciously admits this, even to herself?"

Kohanov's reaction to this dilemma was to ask a thousand more questions, and for some odd reason, to strive to answer them: How do horses inspire us, open our hearts, and enliven our souls? Are there training principles and therapeutic approaches that can enhance, rather than suppress this ability? Why would such graceful, regal beings carry our species around the world in the first place, enduring our sometimes violent, sometimes comical moods and infernal shenanigans? Is it because they're lacking significant brain power? Or are they sensitive, highly evolved beings, protecting us, nurturing us, gently guiding us, waiting for us to wake up to the wisdom they so patiently hold while we work through our adolescent fantasies of power and conquest, often at their expense?

"Even in the late-1990s it was laughable, if not dangerous, to ask those questions, at least in public," Linda emphasizes. "As my book neared release, some of my equestrian friends distanced themselves from me. Most had experienced mysterious, soul-invigorating interactions with horses, but they weren't willing to formally ally themselves with someone who might actually lecture or write about it. I, too, was losing my nerve. After the galleys were sent off to the printers, and I no longer had any recourse, I would wake up in the middle of night hyper-ventilating, convinced that I would be tarred and feathered, burned at the stake, or at the very least, ostracized. Had I written this same book 200 years earlier, I most certainly would have experienced one of these dubious fates."

Instead, she received thousands of letters and emails from readers who told her that they too had experienced a profound connection to these animals. They recounted extraordinary experiences, dreams, coincidences and connections, recognizing the transformational power of the equine-human relationship, acknowledging that their love of horses represented more than nostalgia, sentimentality, or recreation.



Black Arabian Stallion Merlin with his son, Spirit.

EQUESTRIAN RESEARCH AND TRAINING

These days, Kohanov continues her research at Apache Springs Ranch. Increased interest from amateur and professional equestrians warranted the addition of resident trainers Shelley Rosenberg and Cathy Huddleston, both Epona Advanced Approved Instructors.

Rosenberg, one of the original founders of Epona Equestrian Services, is the author of a powerful book of her own, *My Horses, My Healers*. A grand prix level dressage rider, stallion specialist and certified judge, she oversees Epona's advanced riding and training programs while also serving as Ranch Manager. Cathy Huddleston recently moved from Kansas City, Missouri, to accept the position as Assistant Ranch Manager. A patient, insightful instructor in both dressage and western riding/training, she excels at teaching beginner riders, new horse owners and people dealing with fear issues or problem horses.

Together, they offer workshop participants and private clients tools for creating a deeper, more satisfying relationship with their horses. People dealing with fear and performance anxiety practice innovative techniques for moving through these hurdles to success. Kohanov and her Epona colleagues are also developing ways of reintroducing domesticated horses to natural breeding relationships and family-based herds.

"It's amazing how much training time you save in the long run by simply weaning young horses in a different way," Kohanov reveals. "We also have stallions who live



Linda Kohanov, Ranch Manager Shelley Rosenberg and Spirit drive past the ranch's 100 year old mesquite corral.

with their own mares while continuing to work with humans daily." Kohanov's black Arabian stud Midnight Merlin and his son Spirit are prime examples that in-tact males can enjoy life with other horses and develop respectful, arguably safer, relationships with the people in their lives. Both stallions are expecting foals this spring.

LEADERSHIP AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Epona's personal development programs attract significant international attention. "The Tao of Equus" mindfulness workshop, next scheduled for May, is one of the most popular events. Kohanov and her husband, internationally-known recording artist Steve Roach, also combine talents several times a year to offer workshops in creativity, writing and music making, often employing horses to open people to new dimensions of nonverbal awareness and inspiration. Renowned equine artist Kim McElroy will join the couple this summer for "The Horse as Muse," a special clinic adding the visual art element. And Kohanov will also offer her annual eight-day, horse-facilitated writing retreat, "Writing between the Worlds" in August.

Increasingly, however, it's Epona's leadership programs that are creating the biggest stir. One extended series offers training in core competencies for certification with the International Coaching Federation. "Coach Training through the Way of the Horse" combines classroom work, conference calls and independent study assignments with equine-facilitated leadership experiences through four, week-long sessions at the Epona Center. The program will start in June. Kohanov's popular four-day "Pioneering Spirit" workshops draw entrepreneurs, coaches, HR professionals and managers from around the world. Custom-designed team-building clinics have even attracted major players in the aerospace industry who find that working with horses helps their engineers train for leadership positions more efficiently and effectively than they ever dreamed possible.

Why are horses so effective at training the leaders of the future? Kohanov thinks "it's absolutely no accident that exceptional historical leaders were often exceptional horsemen. This includes everyone from Alexander the Great to George Washington to that tough and feisty Sonoita pioneer Tom Gardner. Even Ronald Reagan - whose charismatic presence led to the 'Democrats for Reagan' phenomenon that Barack Obama has been citing recently - was an ardent and skillful equestrian. Many of these innovators had close relationships with horses who were spirited, even heroic in their own right. Such animals were not mindless machines. They required - and continued to foster - an almost supernatural level of leadership presence



Horse artist, Kim McElroy, explores the box canyon where Apaches once held cattle.

capable of motivating others to face incredible odds and create innovative, highly ambitious empires.”

Yet the author insists that you don't have to ride horses to benefit from their leadership training talents. “Learning to set boundaries, motivate, move and collaborate with a horse on the ground is the most powerful and efficient way I know of to exercise leadership presence, which involves a high level of nonverbal awareness and communication. And those long-neglected nonverbal skills are precisely what the leaders of the future need to develop, consciously, if they're serious about finding solutions to the challenges of our complex technological, now global society.”

TAPPING THE OTHER 90 PERCENT

While great military and business strategy requires intelligence, it's now widely recognized that the brain isn't the only element, perhaps not even the primary element, involved in leadership development. “Psychologists have determined that only ten percent of human communication is verbal,” Kohanov reveals. “And yet in our culture, we've virtually become mesmerized by words as our social and educational systems teach us to disassociate from the body, the environment and the subtle nuances of non-verbal communication.”

In his influential book, *The Other 90%: How to Unlock your Vast Potential for Leadership and Life*, Robert K. Cooper predicts that the “dinosaurs of the future will be those who keep trying to live and work from their heads alone. Much of human brilliance is driven less by the brain in your head than by newly discovered intelligence centers - now called 'brain two and brain three' - in the gut and the heart. The highest reasoning and brightest ingenuity involve all three of those brains working together.”

“The true pioneers of the 21st century,” Kohanov insists, “are those who figure out how to tap the vast resources of all three brains - those interconnected sensory/intelligence centers in the head, the heart and the gut. In this respect, horses provide the ultimate shortcut -



Author and Epona Founder, Linda Kohanov, with Rasa.

as they always have. For thousands of years these sensitive, yet powerful beings, carried our bodies around the world, allowing us to explore terrain we would have struggled to traverse on foot. But there was something much more profound happening in these interspecies' associations. Learning to form effective, working partnerships with those horses provided the most elusive yet important education a human leader could acquire - that 'other 90 percent' exercised at a wholly nonverbal level. Now, as horses are no longer required to work in our fields and carry us to war, they're free to do something arguably more important - work on us.”

The Epona Center at Apache Springs Ranch is a significant force in cultivating that new pioneering spirit as it partners with horses in exploring the vast untapped potential of the human mind and spirit.

A special Open House Saturday, May 10 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. will feature tours of the ranch and delectable hors d'oeuvres, as well as lectures, demonstrations and book-signings by key Epona staff. For a schedule and directions, as well as more information on workshops, private retreats and special events, please visit the website at www.taoofequus.com or you may call the booking office at (520) 455-5908. The website also lists Epona Approved Instructors throughout Arizona and worldwide. □



Epona guest, Rita Dulaney, and Serena head back to the ranch from the nearby Arizona Trail.