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Kennedy Duke met many of her grand prix idols, including Kent Farrington and Beezie Madden, during a USHJA Foundation “Making A Dream” experience.

Through the USHJA Foundation ‘Making A Dream’ Grant Program, a young rider met her grand prix idols and solidified her future goals.

By Tricia Booker

Kennedy Duke

Dreams of Riding to the Top

Kennedy Duke had always imagined traveling from her home in Lake Oswego, Oregon, to attend the country’s biggest grand prix show jumping events. The 11-year-old avidly reads about and follows the careers of many of the international show jumping stars and their horses.

So when her mother, Heather Duke, learned about the USHJA Foundation’s “Making A Dream” Grant Program, she knew that it would be the perfect opportunity for Kennedy. Earlier this year, the younger Duke lived her dream and traveled to California with her mother to attend the HITS AIG \$1 Million Grand Prix.

Duke was diagnosed in 2008 with an acute form of a rare autoimmune disease called Juvenile Dermatomyositis (JDM). In Duke’s case, within two months of showing symptoms, her condition deteriorated so rapidly that she was completely immobile and had lost approximately 20 percent of her body weight. After intensive hospital treatment, Duke was able to receive in-home care.

By April of 2011, Duke was well enough to ride and show on occasion, so the family purchased a pony. Her dreams now include riding and training

ponies and horses and one day attending the Olympic Games to watch the show jumping team win its next medal.

In Stride: When you first heard you were chosen for the “Making A Dream” grant, what was your reaction?

Duke: I was super excited because I knew I would get to do something special with horses. When I was chosen, I couldn’t believe that it was happening and ran around telling everyone I knew, because I was so excited. I would love to share my story because I want to inspire people to try new things and to never give up. I also want to help other people overcome challenges and power through hard times.

In Stride: What were a few of the things you did on your “Making A Dream” trip?

Duke: I got to watch the \$1 Million Grand Prix in Thermal and meet a lot of the riders after they rode in the grand prix. I was able to meet Rich Fellers, Rodrigo Pessoa, Beezie Madden, Kent Farrington and Richard Spooner and have them sign a book about show jumping’s greatest riders. I’ve always wanted to meet some of my favorite grand prix rid-

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ers because I look up to them and want to be like them when I grow up.

The jump-off was so exciting to watch, especially since Beezie, Rich, Richard and Rodrigo all made it to the second round. I



Kennedy Duke enjoyed chatting with grand prix stars Richard Spooner, left, and Rich Fellers.

had my picture taken with all of them, including the winner, Ashlee Bond-Clarke.

In Stride: If you could pick out two important things that you learned on the trip, what would they be?

Duke: The first thing I learned on the trip was to have fun. Riding is not something that's completely serious. When you ride around a course, the judges do not look for a frowning rider who put in a perfect round. They look for a rider that smiles and tries their hardest during the course.

The second thing I learned was to be appreciative of all the things you have in your life. I always felt like I was different from other kids since I had JDM, but I realized that I had an amazing story to tell other people.

In Stride: If you could have taken one horse home with you, which one would it have been, and why?

Duke: I would have taken Flexible home with me because I think he's the coolest horse in the world. When I was talking to Rich Fellers and Richard Spooner, they were asking if I'd shown

that week in Thermal. When I told them that we were looking for a new Children's Hunter, Rich Fellers jokingly said that maybe I could ride Flexible because he would be ready for the Children's Hunter division soon and have fun doing it. I think it's amazing that Flexible is 18 years old and can still compete at his level.

In Stride: Did your "Making A Dream" experience change any of your goals in riding?

Duke: I never wanted to compete in a grand prix more than I did in Thermal. Watching all the riders go around jumping the incredible fences made me want to compete, as well.

My goal is to show in the \$1 Million Grand Prix with a fantastic horse when I get older. Watching all the riders try their hardest on the course made me realize that horse riding is a lot more than just steering, transitions and jumping. You have to put in more than enough work if you want to be a successful rider.

In Stride: Does your illness impact your riding? If so, how do you overcome the challenges you face?

Duke: I have to be very careful of the sun because doctors believe that a sunburn can trigger JDM to come back, so I always have on sunscreen. I like to wear EIS riding shirts because they give me protection from the sun. I think it's great that they've started making riding clothes that protect riders from the sun and help keep them cooler when riding on hot days. My show clothes keep me covered when I'm riding in horse shows, which is an awesome part of this sport for me. I also wear a visor on my helmet that keeps the sun off of me.

In Stride: How long have you been riding, and how did you first become interested in ponies and horses?

Duke: I've been riding since I was 6 years old. I first became interested in ponies and horses through my mom, who has always had a passion for horses and grew up riding. We would go to the stables and watch her ride.

When we were done at the hospital or after I finished a round of IVs, my mom would always ask me what I wanted to do afterwards as encouragement, and I would ask to go to the stables so I could see and pet the horses. As I got stronger, she would walk me around on her horse and that started my love for riding.

In Stride: What is your pony like, and what are your goals with her?

Duke: My pony's name is Southern Belle, nicknamed "Bella," and she's a medium. Last year, my goals were to be successful in the Medium Pony division. We did really well and were the Oregon Hunter Jumper Association Pony Working Hunter champions, and I was the OHJA Pony Equitation champion.

I got to compete in the OHJA Mini Medal classes for the first time and placed ninth in the Mini Medal Finals. She's the sweetest pony anyone could ever ask for. She always cheers me up when I'm sad and never lets me down. I couldn't have asked for a better partner.

I just got a new horse from Florida and named her Luna because of a big spot on the end of her nose that looks like a moon. She's a dark bay Holsteiner mare, and we love her very much. I hope to be successful with her in the Children's Hunters.

In Stride: If you could offer other young riders advice on working to overcome personal challenges, what would you say?

Duke: I would tell them to never give up on their dreams. It's like falling off of your horse. You always want to get back on and try again. You don't get courage and improve from being perfect. You get it from messing up and then succeeding. So you should always believe in yourself and never give up.

I would also tell them to always trust in God. He helped me through my biggest problems even when I didn't see hope. You learn amazing things when you get through big challenges, so you have to stay positive and always be thankful for what you have every day.