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Homestead Rider Crystal Schnebly Finds Life Lessons in the Arena

By Nada Khalaf-Jones
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Crystal Schnebly has worn a lot of uniforms.

Combat medic, law enforcement officer, mounted patrol, K9, and public information. But the role that still shapes her most is the one she plays in the arena and the barn.

Schnebly rides every year at the Homestead and Redland rodeos. On a recent weekend, she carried the black flag on her white-and-brown spotted horse, red hair flying under a black cowboy hat and a turquoise sequined vest catching the late-afternoon light.

The performance looks effortless. The lessons behind it were not.

"Horses have taught me that you really can't fake being present," Schnebly said. "If I walk into the barn distracted or frustrated, my horses usually know before I do. They've taught me to put everything else aside and focus on what is right in front of me."

She bought her first horse at 16.

The early days were full of breakthroughs followed by setbacks that felt like starting over.

"That horse taught me that frustration doesn't move you forward — consistency does," she said. "Sometimes not quitting simply means coming back the next day with a better attitude."

The same idea has carried her through major career shifts.

The Army gave her discipline and the ability to function under pressure. Law enforcement required those skills plus communication and adaptability. Horses, she said, became the reset button between high-stress environments.

"The horse doesn't care what kind of day I had. It needs me to be calm, clear and present. That ability to reset has helped me tremendously."

Schnebly is especially intentional when speaking to teenagers. She urges them to stop chasing perfection and instead focus on small, daily improvements — the same approach that works in the barn.

"Sometimes success is one better step or one calmer response than yesterday," she said. "Instead of looking at an entire semester and getting overwhelmed, ask yourself what one thing you can do better today."

She also rejects the idea that changing direction equals failure. Her own path has wound through animals, the military, policing and public service.

"You don't have to have your entire life figured out at 16 or 18 or even 25," she said. "Pick a direction, work hard, learn everything you can, and understand you are allowed to grow into something different."

Her most repeated resilience message is simple: a bad moment is not a bad future.

"One bad ride doesn't define the horse or the rider. You regroup and try again. The same thing applies to a bad grade or not making a team. Don't let one chapter convince you that you already know how the story ends."

What keeps her going, Schnebly said, is the chance to make a difference — whether in uniform, with animals or by mentoring younger people.

"Resilience doesn't mean life never knocks you down," she said. "It means you develop the confidence to know you can get back up. Keep showing up. Keep learning. Your circumstances today do not determine where you can end up tomorrow.

"And if horses have taught me anything, it is that some of the strongest partnerships and best versions of ourselves are built one small step at a time."

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