

Elana's World Show Experience

As told by her mom Lydia Coleman



First some background on our little family to give a little perspective on why this was such a huge accomplishment. Elana was born at Edward Hospital in July 29, 2002. When she was born the doctors came to us and said “We have a couple problems. Elana has a hole in her heart and she also appears to have Trisomy 21.” My husband Tom and I breathed a sigh of relief that it was nothing fatal. The doctor went on “You do understand that is also known as Down syndrome?” We just nodded and said “Yes, okay we understand.” Prior tests hadn’t indicated anything wrong and hard as the diagnosis was we were just thrilled our child would live and we felt blessed

with her life. We called her our little piece of heaven.

We did however have a lot of questions. The geneticist explained that what we knew about Down syndrome adults was not what Elana’s future held. He said that is because the medical field used to think children with this diagnosis could not learn and doctors considered it best to tell families to simply institutionalize their children and go on with their lives as if they hadn’t been born. The children would often be virtually untouched for years never realizing their potential. A few brave parents took their children home and worked with them showing they could be con-

tributing parts of society. As those children began to succeed society began to change its view. Since then more and more research and attention has been given and more opportunities afforded to children with this diagnosis. The more adults with this diagnosis succeed the more society is willing to give them a chance the more they are doing. He said “Your daughter will do everything other children do it will just take her longer.” That most certainly changed how we approached Elana and her extra genetic material.

We engrossed ourselves in learning all we could about normal brain development and began to not only take

advantage of all the intervention we could but also intervened ourselves as her parents on a daily basis. We weren't particularly concerned with how the average Down syndrome child learned but rather what normal would be and then tried to help her strive toward that. We realized that it was essential for Elana not to identify herself as Down syndromed but rather point her to a view that Trisomy 21 was a circumstance she found herself with, not what defines her. We were not in denial; we realized we would have to learn to cope with the realities of the diagnosis which can be very difficult indeed. She most certainly would have to be a fighter but Down syndrome was not who she was! First and foremost she was Elana Kramer Coleman beautiful

child of God and God does not make mistakes and he always has a purpose! That belief is the foundation for everything we would advocate for in regards to Elana from then on.

Elana underwent open heart surgery at four months of age, and then had twelve to fifteen other minor surgeries over the next few years. When she was three years old we moved to New Mexico and found the attitudes around education and inclusion of children with disabilities to be quite different from the community we had been in up to that point. It stood in stark contrast to all we had learned was positive and hopeful for our child. Unfortunately our district decided Elana was not capable of being in a regular class and sought to



Nipper gives then three year old Elana a kiss. October 2005



much better. A few years ago however we began to notice drastic changes, she suddenly seemed tired and withdrawn, she wasn't interacting as well and was getting sick often, her processing was down as well and it seemed like we were losing her cognitively.

We began to search for medical reasons. As we ruled out some possibilities we found and treated other minor things. We took her back to Chicago for checkups with specialists she had known since birth. We finally took her to her former ENT in Chicago to take out her tonsils. As she was recovering in the hospital a nurse rushed in to see what was going on as her heart rate had dropped into the fifties in spite of her being awake playing with a therapy dog. Her pediatric cardiologist was called in and we discovered her heart had slowed down considerably. We travelled home and over the next few months tests were run and lots of meetings and phone conferences happened behind the

restrict the environment she would be educated in drastically beginning with preschool. A three year battle issued for Elana's right to be educated along-side typically developing peers. We won that battle but realized that the job of changing the opinion of an entire district was far greater than we could accomplish. Soon after that we brought Elana home to be home-schooled.

which seemed like much more fun. I took on her home school program written by the NACD along with a developmental program to carry out at home as well and she was doing

As much as we tried to hide the circumstances of the legal battle from Elana she had to undergo lots of testing and she overheard conversations about her abilities or worse her disabilities. It was hard on her self esteem and she didn't understand why she couldn't just go with all her friends to regular school. Elana's demeanor changed and she would be very sad at times.

With the help of the National Association for Child Development we successfully turned that around. We got her into activities and programs where she could be included with children her age, have regular expectations for behavior put on her and be truly challenged to do all she could. Elana joined ATA Karate in our neighborhood with other kids her age and went to Skyline Therapy Services where her therapies could occur on horseback



Elana and Tinkerbell at their first practice show in March 2010

scenes. Her doctor here in Albuquerque and specialists at the Heart Institute for Children in Chicago had it under control but it was terrifying for us.

Two years ago in the fall of 2008 Tom and I would sit awake as Elana slept. We would place our ears to her chest and listen as her irregular heart beat. It had slowed to as low as thirty beats a minute in her sleep and was irregular. Tears would just pour from my eyes as I gave each heart beat to God but honestly we wondered if we were near the end. Little did Tom and I know the low heart rate was not the major concern of the heart institute doctors. While they had told us they needed to check out a valve we didn't realize the valve was actually severely constricted and only spurting blood as a hose does when you hold your thumb over it. Three months after the tonsillectomy Elana went back to Chicago for two surgeries done by doctors from the Heart Institute for Children. The first goal was for a doctor to go in with a catheter and open the valve allowing more blood flow, if that wasn't successful the open heart surgeon that did her original surgery would have to be called in to replace the valve. Fortunately it was successful

and we were able to address that frighteningly low heart rate. Two days after the valve surgery a pace maker was successfully placed and we had a different little girl instantly. She came out of surgery asking for chicken nuggets and wanted to go to the art room and paint!

Her recovery was very quick and we got our girl back. Unfortunately we had lost a lot of academic headway and gained some bad habits. Getting her interested in learning was difficult. We also noticed she had grown used to more quiet activities and would space out a lot. We desperately needed to engage her and stimulate her to want to achieve and go forward in all her goals. We also needed her to show others how normal she was and that she no longer needed to be treated like she was fragile and sick. That brings us to the Miniature horses.

I will have to back up a little as the stories parallel each other a bit. We were first introduced to Miniature horses in October of 2005 at an event called Hearts for Horses. They bring people from the equine community together to give children from the Rio Grande Down Syndrome Network an opportunity

to experience horses up close. AMHA members Kitty and Jim Montano from Edgewood, New Mexico brought out their team Bud and Weiser for cart rides as well as their smallest Miniature horse Nipper dressed as Sponge Bob. Elana met Nipper and it was definitely love at first sight.

For the next several years Elana wanted Kitty and Jim to come with the cart and some Miniature horses for her birthday parties in July. Kitty kept telling us Elana could have a whole lot of fun with a little mini of her own. We thought maybe 4-H or some local shows, dressing it up for fun events and such. Finally in 2009 when we so needed to engage her after her most recent heart ordeal Tom and I relented knowing she needed the stimulation and good reason to get outside and get active. We spent months visiting Kitty and Jim to pick just the right horse. After lots of thought Elana picked Whisper a 29 inch mini horse and Kitty sent us Weiser, her other mini to keep Whisper company.

Whisper was a sweet beautiful little horse unfortunately much to our surprise as well as Kitty and Jim's, Whisper died suddenly soon after we brought her home. It was heart-breaking for all of us and I thought it might deter Elana from wanting another. Kitty didn't have another mini as small as Whisper for sale, so we searched and finally found a 30 inch pale palomino at High Meadow Miniatures in Colbran, Colorado. We contacted Autumn Olford and brought Sierra home, she was soon renamed by Elana, Tinkerbell. That was at Christmas 2009.



Elana's first meeting with Brew.



Tink did wonders for Elana's broken heart. She was sweet and easy-going. We could dress her up for events and do just about anything with her. In March, Tom entered Elana and Tinkerbell in a local Pinto all breed practice show and the wheels were set in motion for a



Elana meeting horses Soldier and Owen

totally different direction for our little cowgirl. She absolutely loved showing her little horse. I laugh at the memory of Elana out there with all those big horses and her little horse. She would walk past the line, drag the horse with her, turn the wrong direction, you name it she did it. Tinkerbelle had never been shown and had no clue what to do. Somehow Elana managed not to run into anyone and we realized we better get her some training.

We contacted AMHA member Jan Gibson of Whispering Pines Horse Farm in Albuquerque knowing she had done wonderful things volunteering her time generously to help other girls learn the art of showing their Miniature horses. Jan was so gracious with advice but told us honestly she didn't have the amount of time it would take to teach Elana and have her ready to go into the show ring. She did however come up with a great suggestion which was to train Elana's dad, Tom, to show and then

in turn he could train Elana. Jan was the one who encouraged us to consider the trip to Texas for the World Show in September. She helped us to contact others from the Land of Enchantment Miniature Horse Club, specifically Lisa and Whitney Hawkins, who became great resources for information and sources of encouragement. Jan was also kind enough to arrange for us to meet Julianna Myers. Julianna was already planning on taking her horse Brew (Chickadee Ridge Summer Brew) to the World Show and since both her daughters were in the older class she offered to let Elana show him in the special needs classes.

I received an e-mail about that time from Carrie Madewell regarding a mini they were no longer showing. Carrie was looking for a home where Oreo could have a job and heard Elana wanted to show and learn to drive. When we tried Oreo we realized his temperament was perfect. So we brought him home in May.

With the World show as our new goal Tom and Elana set out to really get showmanship and halter down. Knowing it takes Elana longer to learn things we knew we better get her saturated in all we could. We did not put her in the AMHA show that was close to our home in May, thinking that neither she nor Tinkerbelle were ready and we had only had Oreo a few days. Tom entered many open and all breed shows to help get prepared. Elana took both Tinkerbelle and Oreo into all classes she could. We attended any training we could as well. Kitty and Jim Montano had become like grandparents to Elana and really helped nurture her and mentor us in the whole Miniature horse experience. Elana and I would drive to the East Mountains to Grandma Kitty's farm weekly and she spent time with Elana allowing her to work with several different horses she had. She went over what she knew about showing as well as care of the horses and helped Elana learn how to control and correct a mini while it was on a lead. We continued with Jan a handful of times and joined other kids she was helping once or twice. Her daughter Lindsey met with Elana once or twice and Whitney Hawkins did a clinic for the LEMH club where she and other club members helped Elana and other kids learn showmanship. We became good friends with some wonderful people in the local Paint and Pinto clubs and at those shows Kimberly and Hannah Murusky as well as others from those clubs would give Elana tips and lots of encouragement before and after she showed. Between shows both Tom and I would take Elana out and go over and over showmanship. Tom however did the majority of the work. It sounds like a hodge-podge of training but it gave Elana continuous and constant input toward her goal. We also videotaped the training she did with different people and then we could review and reinforce what she had been taught.

What takes most children a short while to learn takes Elana what seems like ages. There were definitely times it felt like she just wasn't



Elana showing Soldier



Elana giving Soldier a little kiss for a job well done

going to get it but she was so determined and was enjoying herself so much we just kept working at it.

The change in Elana was amazing. This child who before seemed to be slowing down cognitively and seemed hard to keep engaged was now focused, interested, engaged and excited to learn more! Elana's processing over the six months of showing came up considerably and we were able to introduce more and more academics.

As the World Show approached we considered which classes to ask Julianna to enter Elana in. Our original goal was to place her in both the regular seven and under classes and in the special needs classes. A few people were hesitant to place Elana



Elana admiring her third place ribbon with Brew

in a regular class where she might move out of pattern by turning the wrong direction away from the horse (instead of into its neck) thereby disqualifying herself. Honestly, it was a distinct possibility that she could make that mistake or the concern she might run into another participant causing their horse to act up. Tom and I took those concerns seriously. We felt it was not cruel to put her in a situation where she might not win or might even be disqualified. The reality is that all people, typical and those with challenges, learn by taking chances. If we never set her up to fail we would never have set her up to succeed either. If she failed we would be there to comfort and encourage her and she would improve for the next time. On the other hand if she were to win that would so reinforce the correct way to show and validate her hard work. It would also prove to her and others that she truly is more like her peers than unlike them! The risk of her failing was worth it.

The harder issue that affected whether we should enter her in regular classes was where she might not be able to control her horse or bump into them. She had never bumped into anyone so far in the show ring but it certainly was a possibility. When Julianna and I spoke she mentioned she wasn't completely convinced Elana couldn't do both the regular and special needs classes. Tom and I decided we would each work on both issues with her preparing her for the experience and take her to the show early, allowing her time to get comfortable with the setting and her horse Brew. It would also give Julianna time to see her skills and give us her opinion. We could all decide together what was best once we arrived.



We spent lots of time talking with Elana about the show. We made sure she understood not everyone would get ribbons and that it was okay if she didn't get one. We helped her know that just being in a big show like this would be a wonderful adventure. We focused more on having a fun show experience wearing the right clothes, doing her makeup and hair, meeting new horses and learning new things and less about actually winning. Lisa Hawkins made Elana a beautiful showmanship jacket and Elana thoroughly enjoyed all the preparations for the big day. Quite honestly I just prayed she wouldn't be last in every class and wouldn't disqualify herself.

We arrived on Tuesday before the show and took Elana over to the barns. She met Brew and any worry about her bonding with him went out the window.



Victory lap Elana, Soldier and Julianne Myers

Elana and Soldier wait for results





I was a little concerned about how people would react to Elana and then how she would react to them. We had found in the past that if people talked down to Elana she would act immaturely not showing her true ability. But if people just treated her like any young girl her age she would act like a regular kid. Julianna, Mark, Rebecca, and Jessica Myers were wonderful this way. They embraced Elana like any child with a love for horses. They put their trust in Elana letting her take Brew out to groom and walk him. They even took her over to the show ring that very first night. Elana came to life treated with that kind of respect and while I tried to hide it I was moved to tears often that evening by their respect for Elana and how positively she responded to that treatment.

Elana spent time that first night practicing alongside Jessica and Rebecca and over the next few days practiced with them several times as well. She watched the Myers family groom and bathe the horses. They gave her

responsibilities that kept her engaged and feeling like she was doing her part. Elana met and interacted with others from the Victory Lane Training Center as well and I have to say it was very impressive how they treated her with respect at every interaction. There seemed to be no doubt Elana was capable and focused enough to enter the regular classes as well as the special needs classes.

Julianna also introduced us to Aimee Wheeler from Painted H Ranch. Her horse Owen (PHR Phantom Insignia) and Alina Mattison's horse Soldier (Grandviews Toy Soldier) were both strong halter horses and they suggested we might consider letting Elana use them. Both of these awesome ladies had generously agreed to meet Elana and to offer her that opportunity. We took Elana to meet the horses and their owners to see if they might be a good fit and found Elana was confident with whatever horse we gave her to show. The

people with them as well as the owners were so gracious with Elana and were wonderful at encouraging her as she tried working with each horse. Tom and I were blown away with the generosity of Aimee and Alina at being so willing to allow Elana to show their wonderful horses as we had been previously by Julianne's willingness to let her show Brew.



We are so grateful to all those Elana came in contact with those first few days prior to the show that gave her the benefit of the doubt which helped build her confidence. The words of encouragement to Elana from them fueled her self-esteem more than Mom and Dad ever could have! Elana was on cloud nine and

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the show had not even begun. You would have thought the child was at Disney World as opposed to a horse show! Getting her to sleep at night was a challenge but a happy one!

Our show day started in an amazing way. Elana entered that ring and showed Soldier with absolute confidence compared to the other shows she had been in with her horses Tinkerbelle and Oreo. No doubt that was highly due to Soldier's incredible willingness to perform as opposed to Tinkerbelle and Oreos orneriness. What shined through for me however was that Elana had really soaked in all that her Daddy and so many other wonderful people had been teaching her over the past six months. I was near tears of joy and gratitude when I realized her number had not yet been called. They were down to third then second. Then I heard Aimee and Mark say "She won! She won!" I was just stunned, speechless. The wash of emotion was amazing. So much

energy had gone into helping her know we were okay with whatever she did and letting her know we loved her no matter what that I hadn't fully considered a championship! Julianna motioned for Tom to hop into the ring and I focused the camera on them as we waited for the announcement. Elana clearly didn't expect a first either but you could almost see her confidence rise as the crowd cheered her on. What an amazing experience!

Elana's next class was SN showmanship. I think she was still distracted by her win in SN halter as she didn't focus on the judge with the same intensity and missed the first time he nodded for her to walk to him. She placed third of three but that was okay because she didn't turn the wrong direction and disqualify herself! We rejoiced with her just the same and reminded her in the next class to remember to watch the judge.

Next was the seven and under showmanship class. She watched that judge this time like a hawk and used more focus than I have ever seen her use before. I was bursting with pride knowing how hard she had practiced to get it that perfect. As I watched

the other kids in the class I realized it was good competition for her. Elana stayed focused and kept Brew in check. When she placed sixth in that group of typical peers, it felt like a first place to me. I was so pleased to see other children with exceptionalities in that class right along with their peers, doing their best and taking ribbons based on their efforts just like the others.

Elana's last class was the seven and under halter class she took Owen in and helped him square up beautifully, she paid attention and did a great job against really tough competition including Soldier who was now being shown by another young lady. Elana took eighth in that class and that was okay with her. She had a great time had done her best and was rewarded for it.

Elana was genuinely happy for her new friends who placed higher than she did and never showed any disappointment that she did not get another trophy. She did however say over and over that she wanted to do it again! The next day she about drove us nuts asking if she could have a turn. She wanted to drive and do obstacle both of which she had



done at local shows with Oreo and Tinkerbelle. She had only learned to drive a few months before the show so that may be our goal for next year.

Since returning we have seen amazing benefits for Elana after her World Show experience. Her self confidence has really risen. She is completely engaged and trying harder in all areas of her life. Her speech therapist Ruth Blakley, owner of Skyline Therapy services where Elana rides a horse weekly, has been truly amazed at the change. She says if she could, she would prescribe a World Show for all her clients based on the incredible changes she has seen in Elana's speech since returning home.

We desire for Elana to enjoy life as any child does with strengths and weaknesses as all humans have, doing her very best with what the good Lord has given her. She certainly will not be the best at everything but she will be the best at some things if given the opportunity to try. As with any child we try to help her find what she has a passion for. Miniature horses certainly have become her passion. Sitting in that ring watching my girl run up to receive that World Championship trophy when just two short years earlier I was listening to each heart beat hoping it wasn't the last, surely was one of the sweetest moments of my life! The Lord certainly has been good to us to give us this opportunity!

We hope that Elana's story and victories will help people see those with exceptionalities in a more normal light and that people will be more prone to give all people the opportunity to try. Everyone deserves a chance to succeed. Even if they have to work harder and take more time to do it. We are so proud of her for not giving up! It is hard to have to be corrected over and over but she really stuck with it.

We also hope we can encourage those families of children born with genetic abnormalities. We want them to know that God does not make mistakes when he made their children. It is not a life sentence for hard times. What God has in mind for their children is unique and

different and it is just as special and full of joy as if they had been born without their unique challenges. At the same time we hope all parents see their "typical" kids special needs. All children deserve wings to fly at whatever helps them to grow into adults. Had we never had a child with a special need we may very well have taken for granted that she would do great things and not done as much to help her. We are grateful for her challenges because it helps us as parents step up to bat and get involved.

To say we are grateful to all the wonderful people who helped Elana with this dream and to the AMHA for letting her have this opportunity is a massive understatement. We cannot begin to thank all of you enough. Our little girl is thriving, in great part because of this wonderful show season with these sweet little animals and the opportunities they have afforded her. For our family as a whole it was an amazing trip and the closest we have come to a real vacation in seven years with all the

medical travel we have had. It was really refreshing to enjoy the show and spend time doing something we all enjoyed. Thank you all! We will be coming back next year as long as we can find a way to swing the finances. Our hope is that Elana can continue to grow in her abilities and compete in even more difficult classes next year. We would like to also encourage other breeders/owners to give children with exceptionalities the opportunity to show their fine horses as Julianna Myers, Alina Mattison, and Aimee Wheater did for Elana. I doubt they will ever fully know the wonderful gift they have given us all with their generosity! 🐾

Editor's Note - The horse that Elana showed to a World Championship was Grandview's Toy Soldier, who went on to be named Supreme Halter Champion in the finale of this year's World Show. I'd like to thank Amy Toliver for letting us know that there was an incredible story behind this incredible little girl. This story and everyone who was involved to make it happen are what make us proud to be a part of the AHMA. THANK YOU.