



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Doctoring Cowboys

Nurse practitioner and horsewoman Marcia Hefker serves the healthcare needs of northern New Mexico ranch communities.



By Tim Keller

Down in the deep woods of Trinchera Canyon, Marcia Hefker is bringing up the rear, helping Kyle Bell and his family push 50 pairs of Texas Longhorns from their lush summer pasture along the Colorado border, up and out of the canyon, then down to Bell's ranch outside Folsom, New Mexico. This is the famed Goodnight-

photographs by Tim Keller



Nurse practitioner Marcia Hefker grew up on a family ranch and spent her youth rodeoing and working cattle. Her background helps her relate to her patients in northern New Mexico ranch country.

Loving Trail, which once saw countless cattle drives from Texas to Denver and on to Wyoming, but Bell is moving his herd backward along the trail, south.

The Longhorns have enjoyed their summer in the tall grass along Trinchera Creek, so Hefker shouldn't have been surprised when a stubborn pair at the rear



Outside of her Raton, New Mexico, clinic, Marcia can often be found on horseback.



Pushing a herd of Longhorns, Marcia and friends top a ridgeline before dropping into New Mexico's Dry Cimarron Valley.

broke free, barreling down the canyon through the thick trees and back along the creek to home. As fast as she can chase through the trees on Goose, her gray Hindi Arabian, she's after the errant pair, which has made its way through a fence. Hefker and Goose find a gate. By now Bell has returned along the narrow dirt road; together they coax the pair back up the road to join the herd.

Bell's operation is too small to be hiring hands. He gets help where he can find it. In this case, Marcia Hefker happens to be his family's doctor.

The Ag program at Carrizozo High School got her started as a medical caregiver. Ag teacher Mike Gaines brought in an EMT to teach a first aid class. Both he and Marcia, a freshman, liked it enough that they

continued and became EMTs. The state had to make an exception to license Marcia: at 15, she was the youngest EMT in New Mexico.

When she wasn't busy with school or volleyball or EMS or earning a barrel racing scholarship to NMSU at Las Cruces, Marcia moved cattle with her family.

"I had a wonderful childhood, but I wasn't one of these wonderfully privileged people who was born and raised on a huge family ranch," she says. "My parents lived a few miles outside Carrizozo and my dad worked a civil service job in communications at White Sands Missile Range. He wanted to ranch. He started with 200 acres and 10 cows, and in 30 years built that to 18 sections (11,520 acres) and 200 cow-calf pairs. He was an evening and weekend rancher

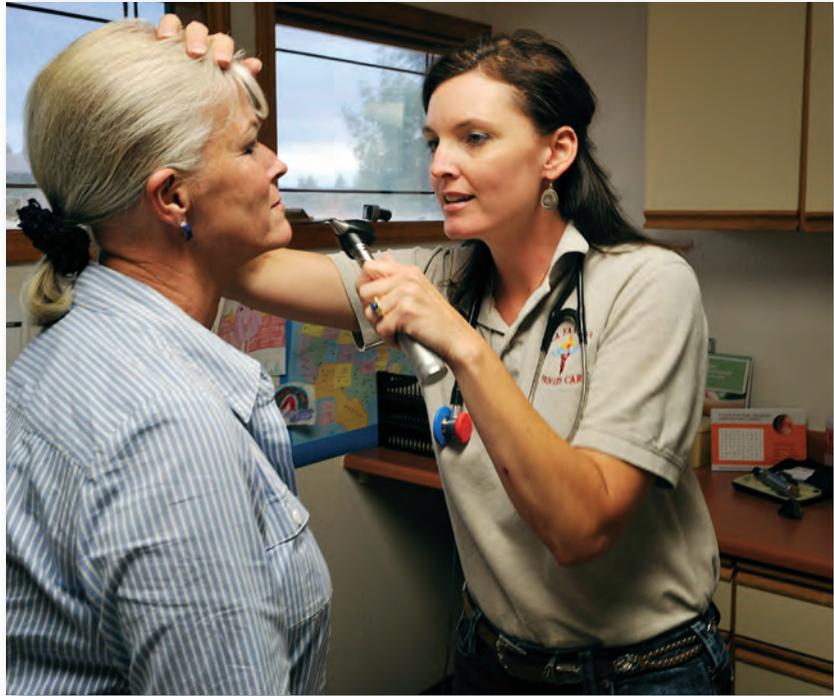


because he had a full-time job to support the family. He retired at 52 and a couple years later had his land paid off.”

Jack Hefker made sure his kids always had horses. “We started out doing little gymkhanas, then the rodeo club,” Marcia recalls. “But as much as I loved rodeoing, my favorite memories are of working cattle. We worked cattle in tough places. At one point we had a headquarters separated from the pastures by two miles of malpais lava. When we had to brand or ship, we had to gather all the cattle and push them two miles across this lava flow. We’d brand them, work them, and then push them back.”

After her 1989 high school graduation, Marcia studied nursing at NMSU but spent weekends driving all over New Mexico and Arizona pulling her trailer and competing in NIRA Grand Canyon Region barrel races to support her rodeo scholarship. After two years, she quit rodeo to focus on her studies, graduating and becoming an ER nurse. “But I quickly realized two things,” she says. “One, I didn’t like being in the city, and two, I didn’t like being in hospitals.”

So she returned to school, entering the University of New Mexico School of Nursing’s Nurse Practitioner program, which specializes in rural medicine. New Mexico was one of the early states to prepare and license nurse practitioners to practice independently, a move designed to increase healthcare services in underserved and far-flung rural corners. In primary care and each nurse’s respective specialties, nurse practitioners



Marcia entered the health-care field at 15, when she became New Mexico’s youngest EMT.

provide care equal to that of a physician, by New Mexico law.

Marcia began her practice in Raton in 1999 and is now a partner in La Familia Primary Care, the region’s largest practice. She serves 3,000 patients who come from a hundred-mile radius across several counties and a state line.

“I love it. Growing up ranching, there’s just a different breed of people. I understand where they’re coming from,” Marcia says. “My biggest challenge with my ranching patients is that denial and stubbornness seems to be worse than your average person, because they’re so independent. These men, and these women, their livelihood depends on their being out there all the time. I have to treat my ranching patients with a ‘loose rein.’ I usually build a relationship based on an accident or another





immediate need. I spend more time than usual educating them about dangerous signs and symptoms because I know I won't see them for a while.

"The most common injuries are cuts and lacerations, rope burns, falls, and oddly, pellet and BB wounds. I try to accommodate ranchers, whether it's coming in early or staying late, although actually most of them want to see me around noon. They've taken care of feeding in the morning, they're running into town to do their errands, and they have to get back to do the evening chores."

Watching the National Finals Rodeo or Professional Bull Riding on television, Marcia enjoys seeing the Justin Sports Medicine Program in action. "I look at the doctors and sports medicine guys that are working on professional cowboys and I think, I do that all the time, on a day-to-day basis. They're treating the professional cowboy, but I'm treating the everyday cowboy."

Working one morning at small rural clinic in Des Moines, New Mexico, she glanced out the window and saw a semi truck and two pickups, all with stock trailers full of cattle. She went to the waiting room and asked, "Who's shipping today?" She explains, "I got them right in. Those cattle didn't need to be sitting out there in those trailers any longer than necessary. The men were not working together, or even from the same ranch, but when a doctor comes through just one day a week, you go when you need to. People come in dusty in their boots, and they're running right back out to

work on their ranches, which is where I'd like to be, too. Take me away!"

Marcia invokes *Lonesome Dove*: "Gus says, 'There's nothing better than riding a fine horse through new country.' These days I couldn't agree more. I ride for pure pleasure, every chance I get. Whether it's team-roping practice in the evenings with my Colorado friend Roy Sanders, checking cattle on the mesa with my friend Mary Lou Kern, trotting a 20-mile training ride with my three best girlfriends, or galloping across the finish line behind my 12-year-old son at the end of a hundred-mile endurance race, I am truly happy whenever I'm with horses."

So she's pushing Texas Longhorns up the Goodnight-Loving Trail. It is Sunday – her weekend but not Kyle Bell's. He's got cattle to move. Marcia says, "I have patients who invite me to rope or work cattle with them. I get the luxury of being a guest on these ranches." A perfect day off is spent on horseback. As the herd tops out along the verdant ridgeline before dropping into the Dry Cimarron Valley, Marcia rides beside Kyle's young kids, Ben and Melissa, relaxed and content bringing up the rear.

Kyle takes advantage of some pens to rest cattle, horses and riders. Taking in the panoramic view of hillsides and pastures green from late-summer monsoon rains, Marcia savors the moment from her saddle. There's no place she'd rather be, and nothing she'd rather be doing.



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Tim Keller is a writer and photographer living in northern New Mexico.

Learn more about his work at www.timkellerarts.com.