

# The Washington Post

## Loudoun riding teacher has put generations of kids on the right path

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Nancy Dillon said she has been teaching youngsters to ride since "at least" 1966. By her count, she has placed more than 1,000 young people in the saddle and has broken in hundreds of horses.

When I told her recently that she looks as thin and trim as when we first met in the late 1960s, she said, "I eat a lot, but my hours are from daylight to dark, seven days a week."

Her turf is Chimney Hill Farm, the 120-acre Dillon homestead on Greggsville Road just outside Philomont, about at the geographical center of [Loudoun County](#). Down a dirt lane, a sign reads, "Speed Limit: Walk, Trot, Jog." Beyond it are grass and sand paddocks enclosed by solid but weathered three-board fencing. There is just enough clutter that you know it's a real horse farm. Three ponds, a well and large green run-in sheds mark the fields.

"They're a lot happier outside than in," Dillon said when I motioned to the sheds. We conversed as the sun rose. She was mounted on Long John, a 16-hands-high paint from Texas.

Dillon's father, Sam Graham, taught his three children to ride on Tranquility farm, west of Purcellville. Dillon said she grew up being treated like a boy, "making hay, riding tractors, breaking horses and ponies."

Joseph Rogers, a doctor, took Dillon on her first fox hunt when she was 8. "The Rogers and my father were great friends. It was . . . right in Leesburg, really," she said, referring to today's town. "It was fun and fast. I remember I got the bug, and I've been doing it ever since."

Dillon's children, like her, were riding to the hounds at 7 or 8. "I started teaching when [fox hunters] would see our kids out hunting, and their kids would be watching TV or something," she said. "Maybe I charged \$15 an hour."

Dillon recalled that in the 1960s, Loudoun had only two or three farms specializing in teaching young riders. "Now, there's a place around every corner -- at least 12 in a 10-mile-radius," she said. Dillon's only advertisement is her number in the telephone directory.

My younger daughter, Gretchen, said she doesn't mind being called "one of those horse-crazy girls who Dillon taught."

"She had so much patience. Once you graduated from North Star, you moved on to Cracker Jack. She'd take us on trail rides. We practically lived there. We would take the horses swimming in their pond," Gretchen

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said.

Riding isn't for everybody, Dillon told me. "They need to be begging to ride, especially the boys."

Many of Dillon's 30 "kids," as she referred to her students, live in Loudoun and Fauquier counties and just want to learn to ride on their own -- "cross-country," she calls it.

"The ones that are gung-ho, they really live it. Trim their manes, sharpen hoofs. They help handle the young ponies. Stay into the afternoon. They've got to put mileage on at cross-country before we allow them to go hunting," she said.

"The hunting kids ride all year round," Dillon said of the 12 to 14 who want to fox hunt. "We don't put up with kids that don't listen. They've got to be respectful and help each other." When I asked Dillon how many horses she has, she hesitated. "And just to think, I was a math major" at Mary Washington College. She later came up with "about 65." All except eight are owned by the Dillons.

Her son Neal buys many of the unbroken horses, Welsh and crossbred ponies -- yearlings in the \$2,000 to \$5,000 range. "Every animal we have, we've broke and trained ourselves," Dillon said.

She mentioned Forest Firestone, a teen Dillon taught to ride at 5, who now trains ponies and helps out with everything. A Dillon daughter, Daphne Alcock, and her three children live next to the farm and help when needed.

Training a pony can take a long time, and you often have only the cool morning hours. Dillon recalled that when she was younger, her father "brought in six wild ponies. Took us a whole summer before we even could lead them. You never know if a pony will hunt until you get them out there. The hounds make them so excited. The pressure of 50 horses galloping across the field -- then your having to wait your turn at the fence.

"It's all work. I don't care if I just break even."

Dillon called out in parting, "The Lord knew what He was doing. Gave us girls who love horses."

She turned Long John, and they jogged off.

*Eugene Scheel is a historian and mapmaker who lives in Waterford.*

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