

A woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a white t-shirt and a dark blue blazer, is smiling and looking up at a brown horse. The horse is wearing a black halter with a gold-colored buckle. The background is a lush green hedge under a blue sky with light clouds. The text is overlaid on the lower left side of the image.

As a young girl, Kildare-born *Lisa Coffey* was told to settle for a job in a supermarket, but instead she went to university, migrated to the other side of the world and opened the first equine-assisted therapy centre in Australia, helping hundreds of people and racehorses find a new way in life.

# Coffey

makes  
*EVERYTHING* better

Words / Jessica Owers.

The Irish have a saying that you'll never plough a field by turning it over in your mind, so Lisa Coffey must be an Irishwoman. Down the bottom of southeast Australia, on the Mornington Peninsula in Moorooduc and Balnarring and a little further north in Pakenham, she is one of the busiest in racing's aftercare industry.

Forty ex-racehorses spread between three farms, a crew of up to 20, countless volunteers and 250 clients a week through the gates of her business, Racing Hearts. In a nutshell, it's a place where thoroughbreds are rehomed or reschooled for a very specific purpose – to be equine-assisted therapy animals.

"It's my nature to love helping people, and I love helping horses, so to match the two together was something of a no-brainer," Coffey says. "At the beginning of all this, I went away to the Equine Psychotherapy Institute in Daylesford to study how to genuinely integrate horses into therapy sessions, because the last thing I wanted to do was to sell some wishy-washy, magic package that promised people they'd feel better if they came to pat a horse."

Racing Hearts is one of Victoria's most recognised facilities for equine-assisted therapy. It gives people a leg up, both physically and figuratively, through interaction with horses. Its goodwill has spread the length of the country so that it's now supported by Ciaran Maher, Victoria Racing Club, Godolphin, Henry Dwyer Racing, PACE Development Group and Racing Victoria and is always open to new partnerships.

"At last count, about 580 people have been through Racing Hearts in two-and-a-half years," she says. "It's amazing. Full-on, but amazing."

The success of a business like this often rests on the empathy and drive of its captain. In this instance, Coffey is well-placed at Racing Hearts. She was a tenacious, ambitious child growing up in Kildare, but those characteristics were lost in a less than ideal family home.

"My childhood was far from amazing," she says. "I remember telling my dad one day that I wanted to go to university and he laughed at me. He said; 'you're a Coffey, and Coffeys don't go to university. You'd want to get that out of your head and go find yourself a job down at the supermarket'. That memory has never, ever left me, and with the support of my mum who tried her best for us, I left home when I was 15 and here I am today with four degrees."

It might be this upbringing that helps Coffey relate to clients at Racing Hearts. Her brother didn't survive their childhood as well as she did, and he's always on her mind in her everyday work.

"Everybody asks me the question of why I came up with Racing Hearts, and the answer is that it made sense to join horses with people that have mental health issues," she says. "But from my own private perspective, my brother came out of our childhood an awful worse than I did, and I think about his experience as a kid and how it has impacted his life in a really major way. If there was something like this available to him when he was a young child, his life might not have taken all the bad turns that it did."

Coffey has taken this sad chapter of her life and turned it into something extraordinary. She's the kind of woman that will be told she won't succeed, only to go hard and succeed beyond her wildest expectations. Racing Hearts was the first organisation of its kind in Australia, founded in 2018 and, in three short years, it's become the benchmark for equine-assisted therapy. It's now in New South Wales.

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"Of the kids that we get through Racing Hearts, the ones we see the biggest change in are those that are aged between eight and 13," she says. "We seem to be able to make the biggest impact on them, in terms of their coping strategies and healthy expressions of emotion."

Coffey's qualifications include equine science, counselling and psychology, and she's about to set off on either a Masters or PhD, the latter psychology-based with focus on understanding the neurosciences behind equine-assisted therapy. It's heavy stuff, but Coffey wants to properly understand the mechanics of her programs because anecdotal feedback isn't enough. She wants to know what physically happens to the human body and mind, in terms of hormones and physical change, when clients are working with her horses.

"I think that thing of being told I can't do something often comes back to me because as a kid I was told repeatedly that I was stupid" she said. "When I do things, I tend to get hyper-focused and do them twice as big. It's not always a good thing but in the case of Racing Hearts, I guess it has been an advantage."

It's hard to believe that this articulate, deftly educated woman once wanted to be a lawyer. Coffey's place in the off-track community in Victoria has become so strong that you can only consider the industry's loss had she gone another way. As an ambassador for Racing Victoria's Off the Track Program, she has been a key player in the success of the state's off-the-track (OTT) thoroughbred programs, and she's a go-to when it comes to the retraining and rehoming of hundreds of thoroughbreds.

"Everyone wants the pretty ones, sound ones and ones that jump big fences," she says. "I played a small part in establishing Racing Victoria's OTT program and one of the biggest issues was all of the horses that no one wanted. They were the horses that weren't 100 percent sound, that were not athletic enough for equestrian disciplines or couldn't breathe very well. They might be too ugly for the showing or couldn't be ridden at all, and we were really stuck as to what to do with them."

Coffey isn't the only one that has recognised a second-coming for these horses, but she has proved one of the best at making it happen. At Racing Hearts, she has horses that can and can't be ridden, horses that had temperament issues and now don't, and horses like the Grand Annual winners Gold Medals and Ablaze. But even they aren't the most famous of her acquaintances.

Long before Coffey migrated to Australia in 2009, she rode for national hunt trainers in Ireland and worked for an equine transport company handling the logistics of Coolmore's frequent flyers. She flew with the likes of Footstepsinthesand, Yeats and Mastercraftsman, Yeats in particular leaving a magnificent impression.

Almost the whole of Coffey's professional career has waded through the racing industry. She's made a living from it on both sides of the world, but the good work she does these days is more passion than economics. Like everyone, she has concerns about the industry's public licence, and she's probably in a better position than most to have an opinion on it.

"The traceability issue really worries me," she says. "I'm not delusional. I know that not every horse can go on to a healthy life, but the traceability of horses that are bred in this industry is a real issue because horses are getting lost, no one knowing where they end up. It's not good enough and the horses deserve a lot better, and I really do think it's our biggest challenge in terms of equine welfare."

When it comes to making a difference, Coffey is at the coal face. It's a normal occurrence for her to have to explain her support of racing to non-racing audiences, and she does so by owning her educated opinion.

"Any work with animals is never going to be perfect," she says. "For me, I'm only one person, but I'm still one person that is helping anywhere from 50 to 100 horses per year. If there are five or six of me, and there are lots of people in the industry making small waves, then we'll make those waves bigger. I'd rather be on the inside helping than on the outside throwing stones."

Coffey's ambitions for Racing Hearts are creeping north. The organisation opened its New South Wales base in the Hunter Valley in November, and she's eyeing off southeast Queensland now. The Gold Coast, with its firm attachment to the sport of racing and its countryside so close by, is just too good to be true.

"I've had a few discussions with people who are very keen on a Queensland farm, but it's early days yet," Coffey says. "On saying that, I'm ready to go when anyone's ready to help me."