



**COACH BONNIE TAKAKJY**  
gives jumping tips to DeAnna Meckling '12 at the George School Equestrian Center.

## Perspectives

# Equestrians Enjoy Coach's Down-to-Earth Approach

BY JULIANA ROSATI

If you ask students to describe the atmosphere at George School's Equestrian Center, you'll hear answers like "it has a different feel to it," "it just seems like everything's so far away," and "it's calming yet exciting at the same time." While these words suggest a magical place, the riders stay firmly rooted in reality while enjoying their sport. Equestrian Program Director Bonnie Takakjy's down-to-earth approach fosters a program that focuses on learning, teamwork, and responsibility.

Junior varsity team member Donna Hordis '10 describes Bonnie as a "realist" who is "hands-on and positive, but not coddling." Varsity rider

Georgina Simson '09 observes that "you can relate to her like you'd relate to another student"—with camaraderie and joking outside of lesson time—"but still respect her like a teacher." During lessons, she notes, Bonnie will "tell you exactly what you're doing wrong and, if you're doing something right, she'll tell you that too." Mady McMahan '12, also a member of the varsity team, says of Bonnie, "She's very fun-loving. She's there because she loves it."

Bonnie states that it is "really gratifying" to share her love of riding with George School students. That love began when she started riding at the age of three. When she was eight years old, she started showing hunt seat at local shows. In the Appaloosa Circuit, she qualified for the world competition in the four-foot jumpers. She continued riding at Southern Virginia College, where she majored in equine management. Bonnie began working at George School in 1996 as barn manager, and in 1998 she became the equestrian program director.

At George School, Bonnie teaches a basic balanced seat, which combines elements of dressage, hunt seat, and jumping. Riders develop a functional riding ability that can serve as a basis for further education in any discipline. Balanced seat teaches the rider body awareness and relaxation so that the rider and the horse become a team. According to



BRUCE WELER

**AT GEORGE SCHOOL**  
students learn a basic balanced seat, which combines elements of dressage, hunt seat, and jumping.

Bonnie, this approach allows for an emphasis on learning through constructive feedback from the coach, from fellow students, and from judges at the Bucks County Horse Park in Revere, Pennsylvania, where the junior varsity and varsity teams compete in shows. Bonnie says that she focuses on “being picky” and “fixing small details” when working with experienced riders, whereas the developmental team offers her an opportunity to “take kids who don’t know how to ride and teach them how.”

notes that another exercise in teamwork occurs if a student is running late or has a dirty horse. Then the riders come together to do a “speed tack-up,” preparing their teammate’s horse in approximately three minutes, as opposed to the fifteen minutes it would take an individual to complete the task.

For George School’s equestrians, working together does not seem to be a chore. Donna comments, “We all get along so well.” Mady asserts that her team feels “almost like a family.” In addition,

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Students appreciate the results of Bonnie’s coaching. Georgina, who has been riding for twelve years and brought her own horse to stay in one of the three stalls reserved for student-owned horses, reports that she and her horse “work a lot better as a team” due to Bonnie’s instruction. Varsity team member Lara Bader ’09 states, “Bonnie teaches us how to ride our horses effectively—not just to look good, but to be able to ride well and with different horses.” DeAnna Meckling ’12, also a varsity team member, says that she has learned at George School to relax when she is riding. “You’re not supposed to be tense,” she explains, “because it upsets the horse.”

Bonnie teaches more than riding skills. She makes sure that students observe a “safety first” philosophy. Along with Barn Manager Colleen Crowley, she stresses the importance of caring properly for horses and equipment. In addition, according to Mady, Bonnie “always wants everyone to be involved in everything,” such as deciding which jumping course to use on a particular day. Donna

two recent alumnae credit Bonnie with imparting significant lessons about social interactions.

Dory Graham-Vannais ’04, a former varsity rider who currently works as a barn manager and trainer at Painted Dreams Farm in Wrightstown, Pennsylvania, remembers, “I think it was Bonnie who unintentionally made me realize that riding and the barn can be a place where people from all backgrounds—economic, social, and skill level—can come together and enjoy the animals we all love. Riding can be professional, safe, fantastically fun, and yet attainable for everyone.”

Another graduate of the varsity team, Zane Bauer ’04, returns to campus to help Bonnie and Colleen with the equestrian summer camp programs. She says, “I learned so many valuable lessons from Bonnie about horsemanship, life, and friendship that it would be hard to pin down one specific example. She continues to enrich my life to this day, and I am so thankful that I ever got the chance to meet her.”