

SEE HER, BE HER



*Raised with grit and a cowgirl spirit,
Esperanza Tervalon-Garrett is transforming
dreams into reality.*

By Jessica Hein

From the front porch of her log cabin in Ashland, Oregon, Esperanza Tervalon-Garrett wraps caramel palms around her coffee mug, letting the warmth seep from cup to hand. Eyes closed, and her mind takes flight. She knows the power of dreaming big, and Esperanza isn't afraid to let herself imagine and reimagine what's possible, free from the shackles of stereotypes and self-doubt.

As her eyes open, Esperanza drinks in the serene vista of a glowing sunrise breaking over the Cascade-Siskiyou Mountains just outside her door, bathing the valley she calls home in celestial beams. The visual is a beacon of hope, of faith and a reminder that with a new dawn comes the power to make a real, tangible difference.

Dreams in hand, the tenacious go-getter's mind starts turning, figuring out how to plow the soil of aspiration into reality. She's a "manifesting magician," waving her wand of ambitious action to cultivate a new reality for herself and those around her despite any challenges that might stand in her way. After all, once you can see that dream in your mind's eye, Esperanza knows you can make it a reality.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ERIN GILMORE

DRIVEN

Part of a working-class family in Oakland, Esperanza wasn't naïve about the realities facing low- and middle-income families in her community.

"Oakland was called the 'Detroit of the West'—there were a lot of factories there with union jobs. The crack epidemic really devastated Oakland about the same time the factories closed and the city fell on tough economic times," Esperanza explained. "Like most cities in the '90s, the culture of my city, neighborhood and community was plagued with drugs and crime. Oakland had a harshness to it, and part of my toughness and grit come from growing up there during that era."

Watching others in the city succumb to Oakland's harsh actualities—including the murder of her best friend Sterling at age 25—stirred a desire in Esperanza to take action in ways that would help create positive change in her community.

"Horses were a big part of how I survived growing up in Oakland. You can't be in a gang or get into trouble after school if you are at the barn riding horses," she confessed; she shared a love of horses with her father, who would take Esperanza to Oakland's City Stables to kick up her heels across the farm's seven-acre footprint with friends of both the two- and four-legged variety. "Sterling's murder was a huge motivating factor for me to get serious about living the life I wanted. I actually moved to LA right after his funeral, and that's when I got my first job organizing with the union."

But her desire to help started long before that. Tuned into the realities facing her community, Esperanza and brother Lateef were enveloped into family-dinner conversations about her parents' own efforts to help others and social issues, like the ways existing systems impact various populations differently. Her father, Lucas Daumont, was a psychologist working as a school counselor and with incarcerated youth. Her mother, Dr. Melanie Tervalon, was one of the first Black pediatricians at Oakland Children's Hospital—she attended medical school while Esperanza was an infant, and even had her young daughter on a picket line at 6 weeks old—and she trailblazed programs around diversity, maternal health and public health. That influence ignited a spark in Esperanza, which continued to smolder.

"Social and racial justice might feel like new concepts to a lot of people who are coming into their own about what race, gender and class mean [right now], but they've always been kitchen-table conversations for me," Esperanza said. "As a Black woman who people could perceive as not being Black, understanding the richness—the strength—of being Black and the history of Black people in this country is really central to my identity. Long before the country was figuring out that Black lives matter, my parents were instilling it to us in the home."

Work with the labor union as a young professional paved the way into politics, where Esperanza was instrumental in helping unite, inform and inspire voters of color to get involved, hands-on, in their own local governmental destiny.



"My parents raised me to be so fearless and outspoken; I don't know that I could have had any other job," Esperanza laughed. "I'm really good at meeting people where they are. I'll talk to anyone, and I can connect with people who don't agree with me and still find things in common because I believe in our shared community."

Showing underserved populations the absolute power of their vote was the root of Esperanza's mission when she took the executive director reins of Oakland Rising, an organization dedicated to mobilizing voters of color throughout the city, most notably in low-income areas and immigrant-based communities. Esperanza recognized Oakland's working-class population could make a true governmental impact, and she knew firsthand how barriers of accessibility and more primal priorities—like keeping one's family fed—could

deter potential voters from city hall involvement.

"A lot of my work is about educating people about the [voting] process, demystifying the actual process of voting so they know what to expect, and then inspiring them to remember that they matter and their votes matter," she said. In 2010, Esperanza was honored with the Redford Center's Art of Activism award for her efforts with Oakland Rising.

BACK TO HER ROOTS

Though busy with a prosperous career while also single-handedly raising her son, Santiago, Esperanza began hearing the siren call of horses and rural life in the mid-2000s—it had been there since her childhood, along with those guiding principles of Western culture that shaped her core values: honesty, integrity, hard work and more.

Reunited with some childhood horse friends in 2008, the itch to get back in the saddle finally reached a boiling point. And when Esperanza's mind is made up, action can only follow.

"We spent that summer buying horses and riding together, and it all came back," Esperanza said. "I was like, 'I need this.' For some people, horses just get in your soul and you need them."

In her 30s at the time, the realities of riding kept her a bit more grounded. Older and wiser this time around, the horsewoman realized a young prospect and breakneck barrel racing might be a recipe for disaster, so she gravitated more toward the vaquero traditions of

cowboy dressage and—later—the finesse of Western pleasure, rather than rekindling the can-chasing dreams of her free-spirited youth.

"I love the elegance of Western pleasure. I also find that it's perfect for where I am in my riding lifecycle," she said. "It looks elegant, soft and easy, but Western pleasure is really hard! I sort of like that about it, too. These horse-and-rider teams are hard-working athletes who make it look easy, and I want to be part of that. Once the idea was in my head, I couldn't get it out, so I started making it happen."

But city living with horses is tough: limited accessibility and high costs stitch the fabric of that reality, and it spurred in Esperanza a desire for a change of scenery. It's a perspective she shared with her wife of five years, Christine. So three years ago, the couple scraped together money to pur-

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Dancing Hearts Esperanza Tervalon-Garrett (front left) with wife Christine and son Santiago

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chase 16 acres in Southern Oregon. Quitting their jobs to pursue their dream, Esperanza and Christine plucked up their young family and—on a wing and a prayer—moved from a California concrete jungle to the heart of rural Pacific Northwest wilderness. They christened their new start Dancing Hearts Ranch, an homage to the pursuit of joy that drives the couple.

“We were working really hard and making \$350,000 a year, but we were living paycheck to paycheck [in California],” Esperanza said. “We knew that we wanted to live a slower life that was more connected to the land and ourselves.”

A handful of consulting gigs—originally accepted by Esperanza temporarily before they got the ranch off the ground—spiraled into a flourishing, multi-million dollar political consulting firm. Esperanza is the CEO of Dancing Hearts Consulting, and Christine is the firm’s chief financial officer.

“Esperanza is fire and light. Her tenacity and personality is infectious,” said Dancing Hearts Consulting’s Chief Strategy Officer Carmen Berkley, who lives in Washington D.C. “She’s obsessed with her ranch, with her family and she’s also making real change in the world. It’s one of the reasons I love working with her. And I love that she has been able to provide a ton of women—Black women and women of color—a place to work that is safe, amazing and fun and flexible. I think that is what most women need. Being in that type of work environment is really healing.”

Back at the ranch, with a four-stall barn just begging to be filled, Esperanza’s herd has expanded to include several Paints, though several currently live off-site. “JaxieBaby,” a 2009 sorrel overo gelding formally known as Norfleets Lil Shadow, has been her main man, and she’s got big goals in mind for him and her newest addition, Never Doubt A Cowboy, a 2016 sorrel overo gelding nicknamed “Uno.” White Lace And Roses, a 4-year-old tobiano mare, and dun solid yearling Midas Lil Investment call Dancing Hearts Ranch home, too.

“I’ve always been into Paints,” Esperanza said about her chrome collection. “I’ve been around a lot of other breeds, but American stock-type horses speak to what, I think, America is supposed to be—it’s this melting pot horse, who is absolutely beautiful, regal and smart, and can camouflage and mix in and do it all. I’m really excited to be part of that legacy.”

BREAKING THROUGH

From her mountain refuge, Esperanza sips a glass of pinot noir and gazes across her patch of heaven. It’s a time of reflection for the horsewoman, who is astutely aware of how her grit, determination and drive have created a lifetime worth of memories en route to accomplishing each of her varied ambitions: wife, mother, CEO and entrepreneur.

But not one to sit idle, Esperanza’s already taking steps to make her next goal a reality. The horsewoman knew she wanted to compete and be the first Black woman to win an APHA world championship, but she first needed to find the right fit—riding-wise—

and figure out how to break into the world of horse showing. From the outside looking in, horse shows can seem cliquish and unwelcoming to newcomers, who struggle to digest both written rules and unwritten nuances that go into a winning run. But the desire to show competitively—and even win at the highest levels—has kept Esperanza focused as she breaks down barriers, both real and perceived, one by one.

“Showing seemed really in-crowd, like there was no way I could get into it. I’d heard such horrible things about show people—I thought they were going to be really mean,” Esperanza confessed. “But a lot of these barriers were stories and stereotypes that we tell ourselves about people and about places that actually aren’t true. As a Black woman, it really resonates with me because it’s something I overcome every day.”

Like a good student of her craft, Esperanza started by doing her homework—networking with equestrians in her area and asking for advice. Inspired by fellow Pacific Northwest APHA member Emily Tuma on Instagram, Esperanza took initiative to reach out and asked to pick Emily’s brain over coffee about horse-showing life. Though they live about three hours apart—Esperanza in Ashland and Emily in Bend—that meeting launched a connection to trainer Michael Davis, with whom Esperanza now trains. Now, between balancing her career and family, Esperanza makes time to continue her own education about the sport, watching videos of winning runs, working out daily and practicing her saddle skills, both in Bend under Michael’s guidance and back at home on her own.

“Her desire to be the best and win a world title is the drive behind her motivation. She wants to ride every day, all day—I have to tell her to get off and be done for the day, to think about what we practiced and then come back the next day and apply it,” Michael said. “If all students had half the drive Esperanza does, it would make my job that much easier—you can’t teach desire!”

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Driven by her own success rallying voters of color, Esperanza knows she, too, has an important role to play—one that might help inspire more diversity and participation in the sometimes monochromatic horse world.

“There’s a long history and culture of Black horsemen. People sometimes think that Black people don’t participate in the horse world because we don’t have the money. But the truth is that Black people could not show horses for a long time—we were not allowed; it was segregated space,” she said. “I think the horse world is ready to embrace the diversity of horse people. Fewer people are buying horses due to the economics of owning horses, but actually the largest rising group of people with the resources to have horses are people of color, particularly Black people. So from an economic point of view, we have to embrace people of color to have a robust, diverse industry.

“I think it’s important for us to maintain traditions, but traditions are changing and that can happen in a way that is harmonious. If there’s

an opportunity for me to be part of this new legacy in the horse world, and the world broadly, I want to do it.”

Part of broadening the horse industry is taking steps to consciously recognize, cultivate and embrace new faces, Esperanza says. Things like diversifying how horsemen and -women are portrayed in media and marketing can make an impact—visually seeing someone like you can spark a dream that, in turn, ignites the fire to get involved in real life. An association-driven ambassador program that reaches out to new equine enthusiasts and gives them the tools, advice and motivation to get involved might be the helping hand a novice needs to take the leap. And above all, everyone should actively work to make new faces feel welcome.

“There’s a situation that I think happens for many of us—not just people of color—where people feel invisible. That is not a good feeling,” she said. “My prayer and my hope is that when you see me walking around the show, that you tip your hat and say hello. Just be open to getting to know me—I’m not everybody’s cup of tea, but a lot can happen from a smile and a handshake. There’s nothing more American and more cowboy than that.”

RIDING ON

With an open heart and an open mind, Esperanza is ready to jog into the spotlight, both in the show ring and as an ambassador herself. And she’s putting in the work to make that a reality.

“I’m not the prettiest, I might not be the smartest and I’m certainly not the richest, but I’ll outwork you. Hard work will do so much more than natural talent ever can,” Esperanza said. “I have a sign in my house: ‘Work hard until your idols become your rivals.’ I don’t really want them to become my rivals, but I am really interested in making lifelong friendships with people in the association and doing my part.”

So for now, Esperanza’s got her eye on the Amateur Walk-Trot division—a place where she can get her feet wet with JaxieBaby and Uno, building confidence before breaking into the competitive Masters Amateur division.

“I’ve got a lot to learn, but it feels nice to be 42 and learning something,” she said. “I’m at a point in my life where all my dreams have come true. I’m 42 years old, and I’m in the process of re-envisioning what is possible for the next 42 years.”

Along for the Ride

Esperanza shares stories about her journey to the winner’s circle on Instagram.

[instagram.com/ridingtowinat40](https://www.instagram.com/ridingtowinat40)

