

Taking The Reins Staff & Instructors

Judith Hopkins – Executive Director

Along with board member Debra Avery, Judith is the cofounder of Taking the Reins, a nonprofit organization that teaches life skills to at-risk girls through a unique equine-based educational program. Judith has served as the Executive Director of Taking the Reins since the organization's inception in 1998. She originally came west to attend California Institute of the Arts. After receiving her MFA in 1987, she taught art at community colleges and the California Youth Authority. Twelve years ago she went on a trail ride in Sequoia that changed her life—she took up riding horses and never looked back.

Karin Johansson – Program Coordinator

Karin grew up riding horses in her native Sweden. After receiving an MFA in photography from California Institute of the Arts, Karin rediscovered her love of horses and found a way to get back to the barn. She started volunteering for Taking the Reins in 2002 and soon assumed a full-time job as the organization's program coordinator. In this capacity she oversees and schedules all program activities. In addition, Karin developed the curriculum for the equine science class and co-authored the workbook, *A Cowgirl's Guide to Grabbing Life*. Karin also teaches the photography and equine science classes at Taking the Reins.

Colleen Hennessey – Riding Instructor & Gardening Instructor

A lifelong gardener and horse enthusiast, Colleen teaches riding and gardening at Taking the Reins. She has developed our gardening curriculum, which introduces girls to the joy of observing and caring for the natural world and transforming what they grow into delicious, healthy food. Colleen started riding horses when she was eleven years old and volunteered at a bird and wild life rescue center for several of her teenage years. She studied sculpture at Kansas City Art Institute and has been a practicing artist who has supported herself as a professional cook in restaurants such as Lucques, Campanile, Canele, and Hayes Street Grill.

Ampara Visser – Riding Instructor & Horse Trainer

After finding her calling at age nine, when she first started riding horses, Ampara has devoted her life to riding and horse care. As a preteen, she spent most of her time working in stables and grooming other people's horses in exchange for riding lessons. By eleven, she had her own horse, Baby, who is part of the Taking the Reins program today. After completing her B.S. in Equine Science, Ampara trained in Germany. She teaches and competes in the disciplines of dressage, hunter jumper, and western riding. Her favorite aspect of teaching at Taking the Reins is “the ah-ha moment,” when girls realize that if they do a command properly, the horse will instantly respond, and she delights in seeing them confidently communicate after that.

Andrea Richards – Creative Writing Instructor

Andrea is a writer and editor devoted to helping girls discover their voices and learn to value their creative expressions. She has spent much of her decade-long publishing career creating empowering books for teenage girls, first as an editor at Girl Press, then as the author of the critically acclaimed book, *Girl Director: A How-To Guide for the First-Time, Flat-Broke Film & Video Maker* (Ten Speed Press, 2005). As horse-crazy as her students, Andrea aspires to be a cowgirl, but finds writing easier to wrangle; she loves teaching at TTR because it combines both and allows her to engage with enthusiastic, energetic, and inspirational students. She is a contributor to publications such as *The Believer*, *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, *BUST*, *Helio*, *Hemispheres*, *make/shift*, *Los Angeles*, and the *LA Weekly*. She has also written essays for several anthologies including *Bare Your Soul: The Thinking Girl's Guide to Spirituality*, and the forthcoming *Why We Ride: Women Writers on the Horses in their Lives*.

Laura A. Vena – Creative Writing Instructor

Laura is a writer, translator, and photographer whose work has appeared in *In Posse Review*, *Chronometry*, and [out of nothing]. She is a cofounder of the interdisciplinary arts organization, STROPHE, teaches Latin American Literature at the California Institute of the Arts, and is the production editor of *Black Clock*. Laura began working at TTR three years ago with the CAP Program and continues to be inspired by her students. Her writing classes engage the girls in creative projects that combine the written word with visual imagery to document the world around them as seen through their ever-imaginative eyes.



About Taking The Reins

Taking the Reins is a community-based 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization serving adolescent girls in Los Angeles. In eleven years, Taking the Reins (TTR) has served more than 1,000 girls, empowering them to be strong, confident and courageous.

OUR MISSION

Taking the Reins inspires underserved girls facing the challenges of adolescence in high-risk environments. Teens develop self-esteem, teamwork, responsibility and leadership skills principally through learning to ride and care for horses.

“The emancipation of women may have begun not with the vote, nor in the cities where women marched and carried signs and protested but rather when they mounted a good horse and realized how different and fine the view. From the back of a horse, the world looked wider.”

—Joyce Gibson Roach, The Cowgirls



OUR HISTORY

Founded in 1998, Taking the Reins' first home was at The Paddock Riding Club, an equestrian facility in the Atwater Village neighborhood of Los Angeles. Our humble beginnings included five horses and a horse stall we converted into a classroom. In November 2008, Taking the Reins moved to our current location, a 100-year-old barn on 2.5 acres of land bordered by the Los Angeles River. In 2009, we began our urban farm with the establishment of an organic garden that the girls maintain and grow. Run by a small, dedicated staff and a committed board of directors, Taking the Reins is supported by foundations, corporations and individuals. We also harness the good will of an outstanding volunteer community.

“Teens learn about horses and riding when they come to Taking the Reins, and in doing so, they learn even more about themselves and each other. They learn to stay focused on the present but to plan for the future; they learn to trust the horse and trust themselves as leaders; they learn to go forward without a guarantee of the outcome. They exercise their bodies and develop their physical strength. These skills can help them throughout their lives when making decisions and acting as leaders. In just a few short weeks, these girls develop a sense of confidence. They begin to stand a little taller and hold their heads a little higher.”

—Judith Hopkins, Executive Director of TTR



OUR URBAN FARM

Taking the Reins is located on a very unique site: a working farm that is used for all of our programs. Though it's in the middle of the city, our farm immerses students into the natural world where they can interact in unprecedented ways with animals and the environment. Not only is it an ideal place for our equine-based educational program, but one where girls can also learn to become stewards of the land as they grow and tend to an organic garden. Most importantly, our farm gives girls a place to literally grown their futures. With the farm, we are also planting the seeds of opportunities for our girls through partnerships and collaborations with other educational and community organizations and businesses.





OUR PROGRAMS

We serve girls from schools and organizations in the local community who come from families with limited access to resources; often Taking the Reins is the only enrichment program the girls have. Programs are offered at no, or very low cost, to participants and we provide transportation in the Taking the Reins van.

The heart and soul of Taking the Reins has been our *Riding Program*, which offers our teens the experience of learning to care for and ride a horse. Girls are taught how to lead, groom, and tack up a horse. They then learn the basics of western riding using proper hand, seat, leg and voice commands.

- Girls from youth organizations and local schools participate in **weekday classes** with one lesson per week for eight weeks.
- The **Weekend Riding Program** operates on Saturday and Sunday. It is available to any girl who completes the initial 8-week day program and to all girls ages 11-18 throughout LA County. Including girls from all neighborhood and socio-economic groups adds to the strength of our programs. This diversity enriches the lives of the teens we serve.

"I love the sound of the horse trotting because it has a nice beat to it. Being in the arena with your horse is the best feeling in the world. Riding is great; you feel unstoppable and so in control."

—Harmony, TTR participant, age 15.

In 2005, we expanded our efforts to our program to include a *Learning Center* that offers an array of creative arts and science classes in conjunction with the Riding Program so our teens can complement, examine and express their Taking the Reins experiences. These courses are taught by visiting authors and artists. They include:



- The *Creative Writing Program* is an eight-week curriculum designed to teach writing skills and spark the girls' continuing interest in reading and writing. Girls experiment with many forms of creative writing such as journaling, poetry, autobiography, and fiction. These classes are taught by visiting authors. Finding one's voice—literally and figuratively—is intricately linked to the Taking the Reins process.
- The *Digital Photography* class encourages teens to examine the various ways photographs create meaning in our society and encourages them to produce their own images using a digital camera. They also learn to use digital technology to edit and manipulate these images on a computer.
- The *Equine Science* class introduces teens to science and health concepts. The girls learn about horse behavior, anatomy, and nutrition, as well as physical fitness and reproduction. The class interacts with horse-care professionals such as veterinarians and farriers to see science in real-life terms.
- The *Gardening and Nutrition* class promotes healthy living and environmentalism by having the girls grow and tend to an organic garden on the Taking the Reins farm. Girls grow various vegetables and learn how to harvest and prepare the crops into delicious and nutritious meals.



Riding and Learning Center Programs are offered on an ongoing basis in 8-week sessions. Girls who attend TTR begin their day at 9am and stay until 4pm. They take Learning Center programs in the morning and the Riding program is offered during the afternoon.

"All the prejudices at school and other places, we don't have that here. There are no cliques like at school. It's better...there's no judgment. I go to the older girls here at Taking the Reins for advice or to the adults who teach us. It's like a family—this is your home."

—Leah, TTR participant, age 15.



OUR IMPACT

There is an exercise we do with all new riders to teach them the verbal command to stop a horse. Each girl must practice saying “whoa,” so that everyone else can hear her. At first, we hear whispered, mumbled, hesitant “whoas.” But eventually, a clear and confident “WHOA” is uttered. On a practical level, this is about being able to stop the horse, but on a deeper level, it is also about finding the voice and power to control what may seem larger than the self. Often girls say that the hardest part of learning to ride is “steering the horse.” Taking the Reins equips them to steer more than a 1000-pound animal, it teaches them to “take the reins” of their lives and steer it in the direction they wish to go.

The majority of the girls we serve first come to Taking the Reins when they are in middle school; many stay with us through high school. These girls are often shy, awkward 11-year olds when they arrive; we see them transform into confident young women.



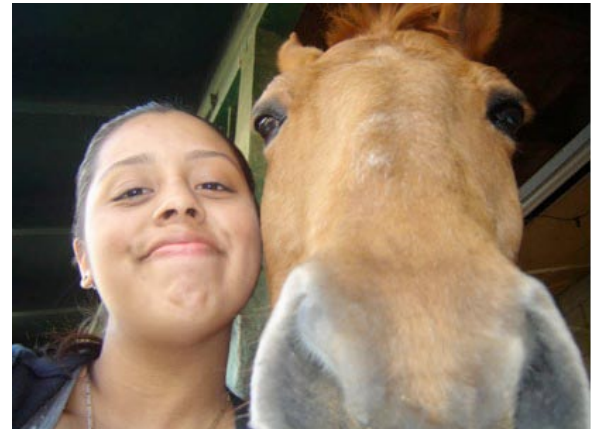
“When I am riding I can feel freedom. Taking the Reins is a place that lets us experience miracles with horses.”

—Maddy, TTR participant, age 14

WHY L.A. GIRLS NEED TAKING THE REINS

Teenage girls everywhere face a multitude of challenges as they try to mature into confident and successful young women, but girls living in high-density, low-income areas face unique concerns that Taking the Reins directly addresses:

- Taking the Reins is a positive, centering force for girls that puts them in positions of leadership and gives them the chance to feel success in a non-academic environment. Often, this translates into success at school as girls gain the confidence and discipline they need to perform. Schools in Los Angeles are often overcrowded and lack resources—many participants at Taking the Reins attend huge schools where they feel lost in the crowd. The likelihood of these girls to graduate from high school is appallingly low. One in three LAUSD students drop out before graduation; the majority drop out in 9th or 10th grade, which means middle school experiences are crucial to keeping kids in school.
- Taking the Reins is a safe space for personal growth and encourages girls to work together as a team to accomplish a common goal. We teach conflict resolution, communication skills, and develop a stable community the girls can return to for years to come. Almost half of LAUSD middle-school students do not feel safe at school, and 13 percent have carried a weapon onto school property. Feeling unsafe perpetuates violence and prohibits kids from focusing on personal growth and education.
- Girls need to be outdoors and physically challenged but Los Angeles has few parks or open spaces. Residents of Los Angeles’s District 13, where many TTR participants live, have the least amount of green space in the city and the obesity rate among kids is nearly 30 percent. At Taking the Reins girls can be active, outside, and gain a relationship with nature that is available to few urbanites.
- Taking the Reins makes mentorship a priority with a high staff to participant ratio and is a place where girls build relationships—with the horses, the staff, and with each other. 71 percent of seventh graders report that they lack a caring relationship with a teacher or other adult at school. A recent report for the United Way of Greater Los Angeles concluded, “The support of a caring adult is critical to the success of middle school students, but very few have it.”



Taking the Reins – The Organization:

- Co-founded in 1998 by our current executive director Judith Hopkins and board member Debra Avery
- 2008 marked our 10-year anniversary
- Only program of its kind in Los Angeles giving girls the opportunity to ride and care for horses, to study equine science, to practice creative arts, to learn about sustainable gardening and to be physically active in the out-of-doors within a structured and safe environment
- Moved to a permanent 2.5 acre home next to the LA River in November 2008
- In 2009 began establishing an urban farm, complete with an organic garden, run by and for girls

Mission Statement:

To teach life skills to underserved girls facing the challenges of adolescence in high-risk environments, principally through learning to ride and care for horses.

Taking the Reins Objectives – For Girls:

- To learn tolerance and compassion by working as a team to groom a horse for riding
- To build a sense of self-esteem
- To learn new skills and to develop a sense of responsibility through positive program
- To provide an opportunity for girls to improve their physical and mental well-being through equestrian activities
- To provide an alternative to negative activities

Program Facts:

- Helps girls ages 11-18 to assume leadership roles and to realize their full potential
- Typically serve 160 girls each year
- We partner with LAUSD Title 1 schools and established agencies throughout the City to recruit girls for our program
- Demographic profile: 68% Latina; 13% African American; 13% Asian American; and 14% Caucasian

Current Programs:

- Riding Program – teaching of Western Horsemanship in small groups over an 8-week period; teach girls how to ride and care for horse
- Learning Center Program – using the experiences of the Riding Program, girls participate in creative writing, equine science and digital photography classes to find their voices
- Urban Farm Activities – organic gardening and nutrition classes
- Activities are offered year-round

Funding:

- Private foundations, individual contributions, fundraising events and corporate donors

Annual Fundraising Events:

- February – Valentines Dinner in old barn
- July – Wine and Cheese reception
- October – Family Day Barbeque



Story Ideas

Story Idea: How Taking the Reins Urban Farm Helps LA Girls Grow

Taking the Reins (TTR) empowers underserved girls to be strong, confident and courageous. There is no other place in LA where girls can learn to ride and care for horses, study equine science, discover their voice through creative writing and digital photography classes, and practice organic gardening.

- Taking the Reins is situated on an urban farm and includes an historic barn, horses, a learning center, and an organic garden. On 2.5 acres, the farm is bordered by the Los Angeles River near Griffith Park.
- For many of the girls, Taking the Reins is their only enrichment program. Often participants come from families with limited resources. TTR programs are offered at no or low cost.
- The majority of the girls first come to TTR when they are in middle school; many stay through high school. These girls are often shy, awkward 11-year olds when they arrive who transform into confident young women. As Maddy, a 14-year-old put it: *"When I am riding I can feel freedom. Taking the Reins is a place that lets us experience miracles with horses."*

Story idea: Girls Find their Voices by Becoming Urban Cowgirls

Horseback riding changes lives—and it happens on a daily basis at Taking the Reins (TTR), a unique nonprofit organization that teaches self-empowerment to girls through working with horses. For many of the girls, Taking the Reins is their only enrichment program. Often participants come from families with limited resources and TTR programs are offered at no or low cost. Young women become strong, self-reliant leaders, both in the saddle and outside of it through learning to find their voice and trust their instincts. Along with a riding program that teaches the basics of western riding, girls take creative writing and photography classes that encourage them to tell their stories and believe in the power of their words and ideas.

Story idea: Family Fun at LA's First Urban Farm

Taking the Reins (TTR) 10th Annual Family Day BBQ – our biggest shindig of the year – will be held at Taking the Reins Urban Farm October 11, 2009. A Riding Show featuring TTRs teen cowgirls, world-class BBQ, live music and kid-friendly activities such as pony rides, a petting zoo, face and pumpkin painting are all part of this unique, outdoor event. Taking the Reins is a Los Angeles-based non-profit organization that teaches teenage girls from low-income communities life skills through horse care, riding, creative arts and interaction with the natural world. It is located on 2.5 acres next to the LA River in Atwater Village. Ticket prices for the BBQ are Adults \$50, Youth \$15, children under 10 free. Also, a special raffle prize will be awarded at the BBQ, a dinner with Pulitzer Prize winning food writer Jonathan Gold. Tickets for the raffle are available on the Taking the Reins website.

For more information, contact:

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