

JEANNIE'S

a champion of the industry

RECENT AWARD WINNER JEANNIE HARRIS IS ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED AND LOVED FIGURES IN THE VAST HUNTER VALLEY BREEDING REGION

WORDS: PHILIPA TLASKAL

Champion veterinary nurse Jeannie Harris is showing me how to wash a foal's bottom. It has a severe case of scour (the runs) and Jeannie exhibits the infinite care and patience to relieve the foal's discomfort that has earned her the prestigious 2023 'Murray Bain Service to Industry Award' awarded by the HTBA (Hunter Thoroughbred Breeders Association) for her 50 years serving the mares and foals of the Hunter Valley.

When Jeannie was a 12-year-old student at Scone High School, she worked for vets before her father, Andrew Crawford established Scone's renowned Clovelly Equine Hospital in 1980.

He was a veteran of the Battle of Britain and a good friend of Andrew 'Murray' Bain; the iconic Scone vet and thoroughbred breeder, which is why receiving the award means so much to her.

If Jeannie's father had not passed away, he would have been 100 this year.

She says: "He taught me so much about working with animals and having a good work ethic."

Jeannie herself was the very first equine veterinary nurse to graduate from Tamworth TAFE in 1986 and Clovelly Equine Hospital's first professional vet nurse.

"In those days, it wasn't unusual to be anaesthetising a horse out the back of the clinic on the grass to do an emergency procedure or conduct a caesarean on a mare out in the paddock," Jeannie explained.

"In the early 80s, before my father's hospital offered intensive post-operative care for foals coming out of the Scone Equine Practice, they just didn't survive."

Jeannie applauds the medical advances of the booming Thoroughbred industry and is happy that many surgical procedures can now be performed under sedation or local anaesthetic instead of general, which makes for a smoother recovery.

But she does miss the times when studs had fewer mares: "We all knew their names – they didn't wear them on collars around their necks."

In her ground-breaking career for women in the racing industry, at 22 Jeannie was one of the few female swabbing Stewards for the races at Scone, Muswellbrook and Quirindi.

"I had to whistle or run water to get them to urinate – these were the days before blood samples were used. If that failed, I would take saliva swabs.

"I came in for a bit of flak from the various trainers,

being a woman; they would give me a hard time.

It's hard to keep up with the 62yo in the airy General Barn, which is the horse hospital at Widden Stud in the Hunter Valley where she has worked for the last 23 years.

With the goal of making her equine patients' stay a short one, Jeannie has an instinctive knowledge of what needs to be done to treat the grand and gracious mares and their cheeky foals.

From changing bandages, to mixing up special feeds for their ailments, she has something of her father's magic – he was a trained clinical hypnotherapist.

Mindful of the danger of a crippling kick, she carries a handful of treatments which she administers expertly into the horses' mouths, sidling up to them at the shoulder so that they instantly quieten and swallow the multicoloured potions.

Nothing escapes Jeannie's notice, and she is constantly ticking off the mental checklist of what is to be done on her shifts in the hospital.

A mum to all, Jeannie remembers when "Females were a rare sight on a Thoroughbred stud."

Yet this morning at Widden, a trio of teenage girl stud workers rev up on motorbikes to help, and she puts down her broom and gives them a hug before sending them off to muck out stable boxes.

"The fillies are smarter than the colts," she smiles.

Many of the girls come from overseas and Jeannie goes out of her way to make them a home cooked meal in her comfy cottage filled with family photos of her two children and her own racehorses.

"I'm their home away from home," Jeannie smiled.

She remembers her own youth when she was in her



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Jeannie Harris at Widden Stud's General Barn



In 1991 – Jeannie at Troytown Equine Hospital Kildare, Ireland with a Spanish vet



Jeannie (blue overalls) at Woodlands Stud administering IV fluids to a foal

At Emirates Park Stud with Jeannie's favourite stallion Secret Savings



20s and nannied in London for the grandchildren of the Duke of Wellington and the writer Bernice Rubens.

"All these wonderful creative people would visit," she recalled.

"After that, in 1989 I went to Kentucky and worked a season at Hagyard Davidson and McGee as an intensive nurse for foals.

"The level of nursing education I got there was through the roof, compared to Australia at the time.

"This then led to a job offer in Ireland for three years working in Kildare at Troytown Equine Hospital.

"I rented a cottage from the legendary jockey Aubrey Brabazon and had the opportunity to meet the Irish trainer Dermot Weld, who after I left, won the Melbourne Cup twice."

Back in the barn, one of the visiting girls gets a special hug.

Amy is the daughter of the Widden Stud's owners and who Jeannie nannied when she was a little girl.

Jeannie chats as she continues to prepare bandages for the next shift.

"I was working next door at Baramul Stud in 2007 as a vet nurse and I was offered a nanny position while my husband became the Yearling Manager."

Jeannie mixes up another feed and says: "We have so many nanny mares looking after the foals and yearlings on the stud, I do the same for the kids in

the Widden Valley.

"My son's school in Tamworth encourages the boys to get the best qualifications and then return to their rural communities to make a difference and I have always looked after the kids here in the Valley in the hope that they would do that."

Jeannie never has enough time to look back in life, but still recalls her most satisfying moments in the equine hospital looking after the critical care foals.

"The ones on mattresses, looking after their bedsores, knowing that you are making a difference and making them feel a little better."

Dr Cameron Collins, President of the HTBA, described Jeannie in his congratulatory speech as, "Our very first equine veterinary nurse who set the benchmark standards for the several hundred who have followed.

"This award represents the culmination of everything one would hope to achieve in 45 years in the Thoroughbred industry."

Jeannie continues her rounds; the filly's bottom is clean and even gets a dusting of talcum powder before dancing out on tip toe, snorting happily, bucking back to her mum into the box.

And Jeannie waves goodbye on the way to the next foal. **RNSW**

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