

The following essay was written by Hannah Bliss – a 2013 graduate of Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas; past Flickerwood Youth Rodeo participant & frequent barrel racer at the arena. It was included in her application for a 'full-ride scholarship' for the Master's Program at the University Of Notre Dame. Most of us have our own thoughts about the 'Cowboy Way' & how it has affected our lives & those around us, but Hannah has simply, yet very eloquently, put into words just how far reaching that 'Cowboy Way' truly is!!

*...And by the way, Hannah **DID** receive the **ONLY** full-ride scholarship for her master's program at the University of Notre Dame!*

*Thank you Hannah for sharing your thoughts –
we wish you continued success
& please don't ever leave behind that 'Cowboy Way'!*

Cowboy Accounting

I can still hear him chuckling over the loud speaker as he teased me for sitting alone in the bleachers with my calculus textbook. Mark was the rodeo announcer at Flickerwood Arena, and he loved to joke about my weekend routine, a schedule that included barrel racing, team roping, horse warm-ups, and, yes, studying in the stands. I suppose it was a fairly odd childhood, but I felt as if I was living the dream. How many other kids got to leave high school early on Friday to load up the horse trailer and trek across the country to rodeos?

Friends at school knew me as the quiet nerd who laughed at any and every joke. “Horse friends”, the term I gave to the cowboys and cowgirls, with whom I spent my weekends, knew me as a member of the Bliss family, a crew that included my mom (a fellow barrel racer) and my dad (a team roper). I cannot fully explain the blessing of such an upbringing; I spent my time surrounded by the “cowboy way” and, as hokey as this may sound, it completely changed my life.

The idea of being raised in a barn usually connected to the popular idiom that refers to poor social habits, but I contend that my time in the barn left me with most of my greatest life lessons. One cannot complain about the drudgery of homework until he has mucked out a dirty barn stall, and few understand the necessity of patience until they have confronted a young horse with a mind of his own. “Boredom” was a dangerous idea in my home, for anyone with sufficient time to be bored simply was not pulling his or her weight in the barn. There were cows to be fed, horses to be exercised, and plenty of dust to be swept.

Looking back, I do not believe I ever resented the work. Those days in the barn provided unending entertainment, instilled in me a taste for adventure, and ultimately gave me the drive to pursue an undergraduate career focused on both practical skills and a nuanced understanding of social issues. My political science major taught me the art of public policy, and my accounting major gave me the skills necessary to audit or even design a non-profit organization. My semester in Ecuador left me with a heart-wrenching image of need in the global community, and my research in Spain and Morocco bought me face to face with the social and political marginalization faced by refugees. So how did the cowgirl from Missouri end up with all those wonderful memories and a conviction for social justice? Although I am eternally grateful for the opportunities provided by my education, I have to give credit where credit is due: It was the cowboys.

Nowhere else in my life have I ever encountered such a committed work ethic and genuine compassion for other human beings as in the rodeo world. From cowboy church on Sunday morning (yep, that's a real thing) to long nights of team roping, I learned how to savor every moment and love the world around me. When I arrived in Dallas to pursue what has been a truly amazing education, my cowboy boots and Wranglers did not quite fit in with the sleek city style. And yet, as I prepare to work amongst the urban skyscrapers in the spring as an intern at Deloitte's Dallas office, I feel the rush of a challenge rather than fear. Cowboys don't back down. They say what they mean, and they say it simply. They care for their neighbors, and their word is their everything. To be completely honest, I think the business world could use a few more cowboys.

My dad used to tell me, "Don't ever lose your cowboy" – not exactly a common bit of fatherly wisdom. He meant that regardless of my job or my surroundings. I must never lose the tenacity and peace that comes with the cowboy attitude. Accounting is my vocation; it is not my life or my vision. I want to be an advocate for the forgotten, to use my technical skills to create job opportunities and to improve non-profit organizations. This is my passion, yet it does not fully define me either. My life is defined by my character, by the very essence I choose to create for myself. For me, this essence is grounded in a lifelong love for God, family, hard work, horses, and, of course, the cowboy way.