

Ed Harrison

Guided by faith, Ed Harrison's non-traditional path has led him to a life of reining and ministry.

By Kelsey Pond

Ed Harrison didn't have a typical reining horse trainer's upbringing. The Detroit, Michigan, native has used faith and passion to guide him through life. With God's word as his compass, the 29-year-old's life-long journey has led him to an assistant trainer position at Deary Performance Horses, in Weatherford, Texas. The road to get there, however, was anything but smooth.

Inspired by his grandfather, who rode bucking horses, Harrison decided to attend a steer-wrestling clinic the summer before his freshman year at Michigan State University. He then joined the school's rodeo team, and began breaking horses for people, charging as little as \$5 per ride.

Although he spent most of his time on the backs of broncs, Harrison knew he wanted to pursue horse training as a career. He transferred to Lamar Community College's equine program in Colorado, where he was introduced to cutting horses by trainer Cody DuVall, of Granada.

"While I was in college, I was ministering and running bible studies, but I was still working horses and going to class; it was a very busy time," Harrison said. "I got tired of the cutting, but I knew I wanted to learn how to get a horse broke."

Deciding he wanted to learn more about reining, Harrison went to the 2010 National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) Futurity to network. He left the event with the promise of an internship with trainer Matt Mills, of Cave Creek, Arizona.

"The first time he told me to turn a horse, I almost fell off," Harrison said. "When the horse stopped, I kept going. I thought I knew how to collect a horse – I didn't. I thought I knew how to rein a horse – I didn't. Looking back now, he really had a heart of gold, because I did not know what I was doing."

After a year in Mills' program, Harrison took a job at a cattle ranch near a Nigerian church he attended, but he quickly realized the ranch lifestyle did not fulfill his desire to train horses. So he began searching for employment in the reining world again. He



Reiner and minister Ed Harrison

sent performance videos to trainers in Texas and Oklahoma, but the young horseman had his sights set on Casey Deary.

"I knew I wanted to work for a Christian, but I wanted to work for one that is good and could actually win something, too," Harrison said. "Casey was the only name I had in my head."

Harrison called and left messages for Deary several times, but instead of a job offer, Deary gave Harrison a firm, "No!" Harrison was not discouraged by the two-letter word, though. While on an evening ride through the mountains, his phone rang in a spot where he usually had no service. He learned Deary was hiring and interpreted the call as a sign from God.

"I called and called, and he didn't answer the phone," Harrison said. "So, I left a voice-mail and said, 'Hey, it's Ed. I sent you the video. I know you said you don't have room for me, but I heard you were looking [for help]. I already resigned from my job in Arizona and I am driving to Texas tonight. You can try me out and if doesn't work out, I can move on up the road and try someone else. I'm leaving today and I'll be there Wednesday.' Well, he still didn't call me back."

Just as he began to doubt his decision, Harrison received a call from Deary. The trainer tried to convince him to wait,

but Harrison insisted he would be there Wednesday to meet with him and began the 16-hour journey to Weatherford.

"I was driving through the night and praising God, but at the same time, I felt crazy," he said. "I've done this before; God has told me to go places or do things, but it has never been someone's business."

Prepared to follow his faith, no matter the cost, Harrison spent every dollar he had on fuel and fast food to reach Deary. He parked on the side of the road to sleep when he needed a break, but he didn't waste much time with rest.

When Harrison arrived in Deary's driveway, he stepped out of his rusty Ford pickup truck and took a look around. With all of his belongings in the bed and black tape holding his boots together, he was filled with more determination than ever to impress Deary.

Harrison showcased his skills by riding horses with all levels of experience – from green-broke colts to proven show horses. He was confident he had ridden far better in person than he had in the video, so his nerves did not flinch when Deary invited him into his office.

"At this point, I knew Jesus got me the job. I wasn't worried about it," Harrison said. "[Casey] said he would try me out on one month's probation, and I've been here for four years now."

Over the next year, Harrison established himself at Deary Performance Horses, not only professionally, but also as a family friend who often provided spiritual guidance to his co-workers.

"I was still ministering because I have always done that, but I knew God told me when I was in Arizona that he was going to send me to Africa," he said. "[I kept thinking], how is this all supposed to be working? Because in horse training, you can't keep a job if you aren't there."

Harrison continued to develop as a trainer and Christian, but in January of 2012, he was reminded of the path planned for him.

"I was in prayer in my house and the

Lord said to me, 'In one year, you will go to Nigeria,' he recalled. "And I'm thinking, that's not really what I had in mind; I'm really enjoying my job. I'm actually doing a pretty decent job now."

Harrison began to study Nigerian culture in private. He knew leaving Deary's barn before the NRHA Futurity would be detrimental to his reputation, and likely his job, so he decided to speak with his mentor after the prestigious show.

"I said, 'I don't know how this will sound, but I have to leave,'" Harrison recalled. "The Lord was calling me to start ministering in Nigeria. I had known this for years, I just didn't know when it was going to be. So I told him [Deary] the whole ordeal and he just said, 'OK, but Nicole isn't going to like it.' I guess when he told [his wife] Nicole, she didn't come outside for like a whole day."

Once again, Harrison found himself with a destination and no means to get there. Still, he remained faithful in his plan.

"I didn't have a dime," he said. "But God told me to go to Nigeria and minister, so if I had to sit at the airport and wait for God to make it happen, come Jan. 1, I was going to Nigeria."

Ten days before he planned on leaving, Harrison was tending to horses while he prayed for a solution. Just then, Deary asked him to join him and Nicole in their office.

"Casey walked in and he stood by Nicole, and they started saying how they appreciate me and my spiritual leadership, and the example I set at the ranch," he recalled. "I'm thinking, spiritual leadership? All I do is come to work. I don't do anything besides my job."

With smiles on their faces, the couple handed Harrison a sealed envelope. Harrison took the envelope, but did not open it in the office. He stepped outside, found a private place and braced himself as he looked at its contents.

"I opened it up and it was \$5,000," Harrison said. "They paid for my entire first trip to Nigeria. Wow, God is so good. I was thinking, I am here preparing for a career. I didn't know these people would be the ones that God used to push me to the ministry."

Harrison departed for Nigeria as scheduled, but while the evangelist preacher was prepared to share his beliefs with the people in Nigeria, he was not prepared for the extreme conditions in the war-stricken country.

"It is so different. People are rude and



Harrison is pictured during one of his missionary trips to Nigeria, where he enlightened village children to the word of God.

everyone is frustrated," he explained. "There is a lot of poverty. Everyone is out for themselves. People will cheat you. And then there is the whole radical Islamic movement. They are killing Christians."

During weeks of powerful ministry with the Christian people of Nigeria, Harrison was placed in several life-threatening situations. Along with dreadful accommodations, he was faced with the increased tensions of a religious war. As an American pastor in a Muslim city during prayer hour, Harrison said his faith reached new heights.

"I was saying every prayer I know how to pray," he said. "That was the first time that I really knew I was truly born again, because in the face of all that, I was saying, 'I really don't want to die, but I'm willing to do it.'"

When Harrison returned to Texas, he was emotionally transformed and unemployed. Without any plans, he happily accepted an invitation to dinner with the Dearys. Expecting only to share the details of his journey, he was shocked when the couple offered him his job back, and with unique conditions.

"They said I could leave for four months, 10 months or whatever. My job would be waiting," Harrison said. "I thought, what kind of people are these? Horse trainers don't do this kind of stuff."

But that was just the first drop in a river of generosity that Harrison received when he

returned to Deary Performance Horses.

"We got to Glen Rose, [Texas,] and Casey's dad walked up to me and handed me a check for \$500 to use on my next trip," he said. "I didn't tell anyone I was going back. In my mind, I went one time and now I could pursue my career and become the first African American [NRHA] Futurity winner."

Thanks to the kindness of the reining community and his fellowship with Christ, Harrison has traveled to Nigeria six times in the last two years. When he is not ministering in Nigeria, he gives back to the reining industry by leading a public bible study at Deary Performance Horses, where his valued team resides.

"I have the best co-workers ever," he said. "When I leave to go to Nigeria, they have to ride all the horses until I come back and they never complain. I'm grateful, but the people in Nigeria are more grateful than I am."

Harrison said the Lord has already called on him to again expand his religious journey. In May, he will begin an evangelical television show, which is scheduled to air Saturdays in the Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston and New York markets.

"My main thing is telling people, 'It doesn't matter what you do or what your job is, you still have a divine purpose and assignment,'" Harrison said. "If He tells you, 'Take your ranch and spend two hours a day mentoring some kid,' you better do it." ★