





GROOMING THE NEXT GENERATION

KENTUCKY EQUINE
MANAGEMENT INTERNSHIP
PREPARES YOUNG PEOPLE
FOR CAREERS IN THE
THOROUGHBRED INDUSTRY

By Robin Roenker / Photos by Matt Barton

Maira Martinez wakes each morning by 6:30 to begin her roughly 11-hour day cleaning stalls and handling foals, mares, and yearlings as an intern at Shawhan Place Farm near Paris, Kentucky. But she isn't complaining.

Martinez is one of 29 students participating in the Kentucky Equine Management Internship (KEMI) program across 21 Central Kentucky Thoroughbred farms this fall. Launched in the late 1990s as an initiative of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Farm Managers Club with support from private funders including Juddmonte Farms, Overbook Farm, Flaxman Holdings, and Josephine Abercrombie of Pin Oak Stud, the program has helped train 748 students to date.

"The idea was that there were a lot of farm managers who had come through Ireland, who had graduated from the Thoroughbred Breeding Course at

Leslie Janecka leads the incoming class of KEMI students on a tour of Keeneland.

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Irish National Stud,” said Leslie Janecka, the program’s coordinator. “But there was nothing like that in the United States. So the goal was to develop a way to do some outreach to young people throughout the country who were interested in horses. KEMI was initiated as a way to bring them to Kentucky to show them what we had.”

Students typically apply to participate during their junior or senior year in college, or immediately after graduating — so most interns are in their early 20s. As a KEMI participant, they sign on to intern for six months at a time, either January to June or June through December, in exchange for housing and an hourly salary. Participants have hailed from 50 states and 19 foreign countries, and a “vast majority of KEMI alumni have remained employed in the horse industry in some facet or another, with nearly half settling in the Lexington area,” Janecka said.

“Most of these students come to us without any firsthand knowledge of the Thoroughbred industry. They may love horses and have pleasure horses. But they have no clue how big the Thoroughbred industry is or the array of career opportunities there are,” she said. “When they come here, it just blows them away.”

When asked just two weeks into her internship about her favorite experience,



Matt Koch gives KEMI students hands-on experience at his Shawhan Place Farm.

Martinez, a Texas native majoring in animal science at Texas A&M, was unable to pick just one. “Every day is a great memory here,” she said. “I always learn something new every day. It’s a lot of work, but it’s hands-on experience. People have this pretty picture in mind when they think of Thoroughbred farms. But at Shawhan, they give 100 percent effort, and [as an intern] you can see behind the scenes why everything is so perfect. It’s because of all the hard work that they do.”

Training the next generation of leaders

Having hosted nearly 60 interns over the years, Pin Oak Stud’s general manager, Clifford Barry, has been one of KEMI’s staunchest supporters. “It’s as much about giving back to the industry as

anything,” he said. “I was very fortunate in my young career for somebody to give me a chance, so I always feel like I owe to the youth coming up to pay that forward.”

Plus, Barry notes that for those interested in launching a career in the Thoroughbred industry, there literally is no better place to learn. “We are really the heart of the Thoroughbred business in the world, here in Central Kentucky. And the infrastructure and the expertise are second to none here. It’s great for these young people to see that and to be exposed to this way of life.”

KEMI helps foster direct and lasting connections between the Thoroughbred industry’s current leaders and its next generation. Trainer Jordan Blair, who did a KEMI internship at Pin Oak Stud under Barry in 2006, still thinks of Barry as a mentor: “He was a real guide for me and kind of a rock,” Blair said. “He told me what it took to be successful in this business.”

KEMI also helped bloodstock agent Josh Stevens find his niche in the indus-



KEMI intern Maira Martinez grooms a horse with help from 2014 graduate Amaris Chan at Shawhan Place Farm.

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try. "It gave me a Rolodex of people that I could contact," said Stevens, who interned at Margaux Farm in 2010 after completing his MBA at the University of Louisville. "Having gone to business school, I knew the basic business side of the industry, but as far as the hands-on experience, I was green as grass. Coming into KEMI, I knew that I needed to get farm experience. I needed to handle the horses. I needed to work with the farriers and the vets. I needed to work with the farm management. I needed as much as I could get, and KEMI

gave me all of that. But the other side of it was the networking aspect.



Janecka said of new KEMI students: "When they come here, it just blows them away."

"Through KEMI I was able to just bounce ideas off of people to really figure out what it was I wanted to do," he said.

Stevens managed the purchase of Dividerso, winner of this year's grade I Woodford Reserve Turf Classic.

The program's interns are privy to up-close, hands-on shadowing and raw, unfiltered farm access — making KEMI the perfect tool for training the industry's next generation of leaders, said Shawhan Place Farm co-owner Matt Koch, who alongside his father, Gus Koch, former manager at Claiborne Farm, has been helping train current KEMI intern Maira Martinez. "The farms that are not participating in some sort of internship program, whether KEMI

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or an internal program on their farm, are really missing the boat at providing leadership for our industry for the next 30 years to come,” Matt Koch said. “KEMI is a fantastic pipeline to train the next generation of horsemen and women.”

Doing it all

As a KEMI intern at Denali Stud this fall, Oregon native Elizabeth Fitzgerald has been assigned to the filly barn, where she’s helping ready the yearlings for Keeneland’s September sale. Last spring Fitzgerald served as a KEMI intern at Mill Ridge Farm. The back-to-back, dual-farm perspectives are helping her “figure out what I want my place to be in the industry and to establish that,” Fitzgerald said. She calls helping foal the mares last spring and “watching them develop a personality and evolve into little racehorses” one of her fondest KEMI memories.

Former Keeneland public reservations manager Elizabeth Snellings, who recently took a new role as membership engagement coordinator with the American Association of Equine Practitioners, called her 2004 KEMI internship at Trackside Farm “an introduction to the Thoroughbred industry.”

“Growing up in north Dallas, I had backyard ponies, not million-dollar horses,” Snellings said. “I knew absolutely nothing about the industry until I came here. And KEMI was very hands-on. You’re there, doing everything from weed-eating and cleaning the stalls to helping with evening turnout and prepping the yearlings for the sales.

They are really good about putting you in situations where you can learn what the industry is all about.”

Jackie Snyder, now a veterinarian with Hagyard Equine Medical Institute, interned with KEMI at Mill Ridge Farm in 2008. During her off days, she shadowed alongside the farm’s veterinarian, Stuart Brown, whom she still considers a mentor. The experience strengthened her resolve to become an equine vet, she said. “Being a veterinarian or a farm manager in Kentucky is a lifestyle. And it was helpful to see that and know exactly what I was signing myself up for when I got out of school,” Snyder said.

Plus, the extensive foaling experience she received through KEMI has proved beneficial in her own practice. “As an intern, being hands-on in the stall with roughly 120 mares foaling in one season really gives you a sense of what’s normal and what’s not,” Snyder said. “And that’s been very helpful to know now that I’m on the other side of things.”

KEMI graduates also note how valuable the program is as a networking and job placement tool. KEMI’s Janecka helped Adolfo Martinez, currently a yearling barn foreman at Calumet, find

multiple positions early in his career, including a six-month stint in Australia showing Wimbledon Farm’s stallion Lion Cavern. That job was followed by a position at New Zealand’s Fayette Park, which led to a job working for Mill Ridge Farm, for which he shuttled the stallion Johar during the Southern Hemisphere’s breeding season. All were posts he learned about through KEMI.



KEMI interns, such as these members of the fall class of 2016, get a firsthand look at many aspects of the Thoroughbred industry.

“The KEMI program helps open so many doors,” Adolfo Martinez said. “The ability to network and meet all these people within the industry is so valuable. There are so many farms that participate in it, both large and small.”

Janecka, the only full-time paid KEMI employee, runs the program out of an office space at the Kentucky Horse Park, that was donated by the KTA/KTOB. She recruits at universities across the country routinely in order to entice students with a passion for horses to give the KEMI program a try.

“At a time when animal welfare is so scrutinized, it is imperative that we show that we have skilled horse people to care for our horses,” said Garrett O’Rourke, manager of Juddmonte Farms and long-



Top, KEMI graduate Adolfo Martinez works as a yearling barn foreman at Calumet Farm; above, Maira Martinez is gaining experience preparing yearlings for sale.



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time KEMI president. “[Through the application process] the KEMI students are already screened for a key qualification in this area: They have a love for horses and a willingness to give 24/7 care, simply because they have a passion.”

Put simply, the program is working: “KEMI students are now progressing into management positions on top Thoroughbred farms and can be found in leadership positions throughout the industry,” said O’Rourke, who heads the program’s 13-member volunteer board of directors.

“This is a result of great cooperation

from farm owners and direct training from farm managers, through indispensable partnership with the KTFMC and industry professionals. KEMI can and must continue, and with proper funding could really be expanded. The industry has to take ownership of its future, and education and next-generation recruitment are key components to that success.” **KM**

To donate to KEMI or to learn more, go to KEMI.org or contact Leslie Janecka at (859) 277-2512.