

The Broken Road that Led **NICOLE LAKIN** to

By Emily Riden/Jump Media
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As Nicole Lakin sits at the Winter Equestrian Festival (WEF) in a pair of stylish sunglasses and a comfortable, sweatshirt - branded with her company's logo - she happily answers questions about launching her own software and the role of technology in the horse industry. It's obvious that her enthusiasm for the topics is seemingly matched only by her passion for the horses themselves - which makes sense.

Lakin, 31, is the founder of BarnManager, a cloud-based application designed to simplify horse and barn management, and a lifelong rider herself.

However, while horses and technology may be at the forefront of Lakin's life now, it wasn't always that way. In fact, the current Wellington, FL, and New York, NY, resident never would have envisioned that she would end up working in the tech space; it was only through a series of unexpected events, opportunities, and ideas that Lakin found herself where she is today.

Opportunities Disguised as Adversity

Lakin was born into a non-equestrian family, but it wasn't long before she discovered horses. The middle of three siblings, Lakin began riding at the age of seven, joining her older sisters who also rode and first competing in the hunter divisions local to her Reading, PA, childhood home.

As a junior, Lakin transitioned to the jumpers and equitation under the tutelage of Stacia Madden and Max Amaya at Beacon Hill and Stonehenge Stables in Colts Neck, NJ. There, Lakin went on to win team gold and individual silver medals at the 2006 North American Junior and Young Rider Championships and to compete everywhere from under the lights at WEF to on the grass in the renowned International Ring at Spruce Meadows in Calgary, AB.

"She got Alaska, a big grey horse that had belonged to Cayce Harrison," said Amaya, recounting Lakin's early years riding with him at Stonehenge. "With that horse she started doing incredible things like going to Calgary and jumping the grand prix and 1.50m and things she only dreamed of. This horse Alaska allowed her get there."

As Alaska was helping Lakin to accomplish many of her biggest riding goals, he was also perhaps playing an even more important role: helping to save Lakin's life.

Lakin was competing at the 2006 WEF when she fell off Alaska and hit the ground hard. She was immediately taken to the hospital for chest x-rays that would reveal broken ribs, but also something worse and far less expected: stage 3 Hodgkin Lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system.

"Hodgkins is a relatively slow-growing cancer, which is incredibly lucky," Lakin explained. "But on the other hand, I was already at stage three of four. It's very likely if I had not fallen off that day and gone to the hospital, it could have gone unnoticed."

Following an initial surgery, Nicole spent four months undergoing intense chemotherapy, all while insisting that she continue to be around the horses.

"I always admired her take on what would be for many people a devastating situation," said Amaya. "She always took it with grace, and she never stopped doing what she loved, which was riding and even planning how to pursue her dreams."

Nicole Lakin and Wannabe





Nicole Lakin

"She was very tough," continued Amaya. "These are my words, not hers, but I think Alaska helped her get through the healing. He was her big rock, her big pillar to help her keep going and believing. She was coming to the barn even when she was quite sick."

Lakin said, "Instead of getting frustrated because it wasn't really within my control at that point, I threw myself at taking care of my horses back at the barn and spending as much time with them as possible. I spent a lot of time with the vets, learning as much as I could."

By the time her Hodgkin Lymphoma went into remission, Lakin's time spent with the horses led her to take on a working student role with Amaya and to get more involved in the management side of the barn - opportunities that would eventually guide the course of her future career.

An Entrepreneurial Upbringing

In addition to growing up riding, there was another element of Lakin's upbringing that would eventually play a vital role in where she is today: her family's entrepreneurial background.

"My dad was third generation in a family retail company, working his way from selling on the floor to eventually running it," said Lakin, whose great-grandfather started the well-known department store *Boscov's* with just a shoe cart in downtown Reading, PA. "I always thought that was the normal thing. You get an idea, and you figure out how to make your idea happen."

"It always made sense to me, that if you created something, you could turn it into a business," continued Lakin. "I never thought to myself, 'Oh I'll be in the tech world.' I just thought of an idea, and it seemed normal to me to make that idea into a business. It's a little crazy now if you think about it; my idea happened to involve technology, so I accidentally realized my love for technology and product development."



Nicole Lakin and Captain de Flobecq with Max Amaya



Nicole Lakin and Capitain de Flobecq

A Solution to a Problem

The idea that would ultimately steer Lakin down the road she is on today all came about thanks to her management role at Stonehenge.

"I would be back at the barn trying to make grain and have a question for Max who was down at the International Ring, basically a mile away. Getting in touch with him was challenging," said Lakin of a summer she spent managing 15 horses at Spruce Meadows. "I was always looking for ways to get around those communication issues and to get even more organized."

That's when the New York University graduate had the first thoughts of what would soon become BarnManager, as she began dabbling in Excel and Word, trying to make tools that would improve organization and communication problems.

"I was very lucky that I'd made some amazing friends that had been managing horses and complex organizations far longer than I had," said Lakin. "I sat them all down and went around the table and asked what the most annoying thing was that they were constantly having trouble with. I said, 'If I built something to make those things better, would you give us it?'"

The answer was a resounding yes, so Lakin set out to design software that could provide a barn management solution - only Lakin had no background in software development.

"I had never written code. I had no idea what went into developing software. Nothing," said Lakin, who nevertheless returned home to New York from Wellington with determination to bring her idea to fruition. "I went on LinkedIn and Facebook and found everybody who had any technology background that would sit down with me for coffee and tell me what to do. I drew out a million maps and did a bunch of sessions with design groups where I poured out everything that I knew about horse management."

By 2012, BarnManager had launched, providing users with a tool that offered horse data and health recording, messaging, calendar sharing, scheduling, a virtual white-board that takes the conventional barn white-board and makes it accessible anywhere, customizable tables, free-form lists, and much more.

"I think launching it was definitely one of the more exciting experiences of my life," said Lakin, who devoted more than a year to research, mapping out features, drawing design concepts, and conceptualizing branding. "After all of the work, it was just really rewarding to actually see people using it."

As BarnManager began to gain popularity and users, Lakin went back to school, earning a graduate degree in entrepreneurship from Babson College's F.W. Olin Graduate School of Business in Massachusetts.



Nicole Lakin and Capitain de Flobecq

"Nicole's a very hard worker with a quiet, admirable determination," said Amaya, who continues to train Lakin today as she competes largely in the 1.30-1.40m jumpers. "She's very optimistic and has a wonderful energy."

It's those characteristics that led Lakin to take on another project idea in 2018: the Equine Technology Collaboration.

"I had gotten so accustomed to having this great, collaborative, inspiring group of people around me all the time while I was at Babson," said Lakin. "I missed that, but also, when I first started BarnManager, there really weren't many other people in the space. By the time I came out of Babson, there were all these apps popping up and people really paying attention to them."

"There were a lot of us now trying to do the same thing: encourage others to use technology to improve the lives and well-being of themselves and their horses," continued Lakin.

Lakin recognized the opportunity for many of these companies to come together to share the same message, support one another, better serve the equestrian industry as a whole, and ultimately, to create greater inter-operability between the various applications. Today, that mission is shared by members of the Equine Tech

Collab: BarnManager, Equo, Electronic Vet, Epona Exchange, Etalon Diagnostics, Event Clinics, JumpFax, and Stableguard.

"Just by building the relationships with each other, talking about the ways that we can connect what we're doing, it's eventually going to lead to us integrating and thinking about how we're building new things for the betterment of the industry," said Lakin. "The collaboration really supports that kind of forward thinking and the kind of work that I want to be a part of in the future."

If the road she's taken so far is any indication, there's no telling where Lakin's path will lead going forward. But it's likely her future will be full of great accomplishment from Lakin and the two things Lakin is so enthusiastic about: bettering lives through technology and, of course, the horses.

"With your own company, you have the opportunity to make an experience for people that is one that you would want to have yourself," said Lakin. "It's sort of cheesy, but every time you touch someone you have the ability to either leave them better than you found them or worse. We can make people feel a little bit cheerier when they leave us. And through technology like BarnManager, we can get people away from paperwork and back with what really makes them happy and why they and I are doing this in the first place: the horses."