



Photo by Aaron Mahler (halfpress.com)

# The Steeplechase at Oak Ridge

by

Jane Porter Fogleman



Photo courtesy of Oak Ridge Estates

**S**panning thousands of acres of rural Nelson County is the exceptional estate of Oak Ridge. The core of the beautiful home was built in 1810 by Robert Rives. The land was made up of Land Grant land and further purchases by the family of Robert Rives and his wife Elizabeth Cabell. The Rives family spawned many important Virginia politicians and scholars in the 1800s.

In 1901 Thomas Fortune Ryan purchased the estate of 4,800 acres and began extensive renovations and additions to the home and out buildings. Under the revitalization and the expansion of Thomas Fortune Ryan, Oak Ridge took on the appearance of a village of its own. A railroad station was built where Ryan and his guests could be dropped off in their private cars for a visit. For entertainment there was an 18-hole golf course with viewing area (all reclaimed by nature today), a swimming pool, and a tennis court. A charming stone chapel for worship was built. An exquisite Victorian

greenhouse provided flowers and beauty year round. The massive stone barns built of granite quarried on the farm with slate roofs were built to accommodate the huge dairy operation, which was one of the most important of the Ryan agricultural endeavors. These barns are architecturally extraordinary. Mr. Ryan's many employees were housed on the estate in numerous

cottages and farmhouses, some of which are no longer standing. Lastly, there were stables for carriage horses and the Ryan Thoroughbreds. The racehorses were trained on a track Ryan built next to his grass landing strip. All in all the estate lacked for nothing.

Thomas Fortune Ryan's heirs sold Oak Ridge to John and Rhonda



Photos by Hay Hardy



Holland from the Norfolk area in 1989. The Hollands set about restoring Oak Ridge to its former grandeur as it had fallen into great disrepair. They have accomplished an amazing level of reconstruction and have been incredibly generous to the Nelson community in their use of the land and facilities. There are numerous festivals held on the grounds including the Nelson County Summer Festival. The Oak Ridge Hunt has many of their meets and functions there. Most recently the Hollands have revived the old training track and have had harness racing on the stone dust track. Finally, the steeplechase course has been upgraded.

Mike Pearson, a noted horseman from Northern Virginia, has been active and successful in all aspects of the race world and had wanted to round out his career with designing a racecourse and being Race Director for a race. He had often heard of the Oak Ridge racecourse and was able to personally explore the possibility of a race at the facility when Laura Justis of the Bedford Hunt solicited Mike's expertise in finding a venue for the fledgling Bedford Hunt Point-to-Point race. Mike decided that the Oak Ridge course with some changes would be well suited for a top steeplechase course. Thus began his affiliation with The Steeplechase at Oak Ridge and the Holland family. Noted steeplechase jockey Zach Miller has been a multiple winner at Oak Ridge and says the course is well designed with great potential. He feels the turf needs to mature but is convinced that it is well worth investing time and energy for the future.

### **Jubilee Family Development Center**

Mike's desire was to have a Steeplechase meet at Oak Ridge sanctioned by the National Steeplechase Association, but a nonprofit organization with a strong volunteer base was needed. Laura Justis was affiliated with the Jubilee Family Development Center of Lynchburg and suggested that Mike interview the



Photo courtesy of Jubilee Family Development Center

organization and determine if there was mutual interest. It was a perfect fit, and the Oak Ridge Steeplechase has become the main fund-raiser for the Jubilee Center. This year will be the third Oak Ridge Steeplechase to benefit the Jubilee Center and will be held on Sunday, October 29, 2006.

The Jubilee Center was founded in 1999 by several concerned individuals for the at-risk children of Lynchburg. Habitat for Humanity had built about 100 new homes in an area where gangs were prevalent, and local volunteers built an outreach center in the same area mainly to provide academic assistance and to have a controlled place for children to gather. It flourished because the need was so great—and thus the conception of Jubilee.

Today Jubilee is located in an old laundromat building. A new gym has just been constructed where children can come after school; it also serves as a place to host a summer camp. Jubilee has a three-pronged approach: job development, educational development and athletics. The three work hand in hand with one another. The children who attend are mainly from elementary and middle school. They come

to the center for guidance and a place for their energy to be directed. They are given tutoring, GED help, employment and career counseling. They are also being mentored by older kids. They learn to give back and “keep up their end of the bargain” by helping to clean up, helping with the younger ones and maintaining academic success.

These children quickly realize that someone cares about them. The center is in constant contact with the schools and parents or caregivers. The children's grades are sent to the center for monitoring, and if a child's grades lapse, he or she is required to attend tutoring and get whatever help he or she needs before he can participate in any of the athletics or fun things. As a result of this diligence, 75 percent of the children show improvement in core academic subjects. The statistics show that 90 percent of the children will graduate from high school; in 2005 seven of the kids who started at the center in middle school were in college. The center helps with college by taking the children on a college tour and giving them job counseling. Basically the center helps to make them contributing and responsible

members of society and to realize their full potential.

As with all endeavors of this nature, the Jubilee Family Development Center depends on the generosity of the general public for donations, grants and fund-raisers such as the Oak Ridge Steeplechase. Mike is extremely pleased with the success of the race, as they have raised over \$50,000 each year for Jubilee. He says it's a great feeling to be able to help give the children of Lynchburg a "leg up" on life. The contributions that the Jubilee Center makes to the children and the entire town of Lynchburg cannot be measured—they are astronomical!

For more information on the center and the Steeplechase at Oak Ridge, contact Sterling Wilder or Susan Carrington at the Jubilee Family Development Center 434-845-5720 or at [www.jubileefamily.org](http://www.jubileefamily.org). For information on the Oak Ridge Estate contact Heather Goodwin at 434-263-8676. And put October 29 on your calendar for a great day of racing at a beautiful venue.

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Jane Porter Fogleman is a lifelong fox-hunter. She was born and raised in Charlottesville and lives there today where she hunts with Farmington Hunt Club.

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