

What Would Jesus Do . . . on Horseback?

Behind the scenes of the Grant County-filmed "Ultimate Choice TV," a Christian-based reality show that seeks to guide teens toward positive choices.

Story and photos by Donna Clayton Lawder

On a June afternoon at the Double E Ranch in Gila, early monsoon clouds darkening the skies and dropping a bit of moisture, the cast and crew of "Ultimate Choice TV" are finishing lunch, hoping things will clear up enough to shoot a horse-riding segment. The large, rustic and welcoming dining hall is buzzing with the youths' high-energy conversations. Some have just completed their first successful foray on horseback.

"We've been hanging out, riding horses," says a young man named Leo, one of the cast-mates, all in their teens and early 20s. "There are eight of us, and we've been hanging out pretty good."

The tall, wiry Brazilian, smiling broadly beneath his large cowboy hat, has been in the US for two years now, and connected with the television show through the Celebration Church, where he is an intern. The

Jacksonville, Fla., mega-church is "Bible-based" with a strong missionary arm. The wholesome-looking "Ultimate Choice" cast is good company, Leo says, and he underscores his sense of mission in being part of making this show—a "moral alternative" for teens.

"Kids want to connect with people who are doing what's real," Leo says. Doing what's real isn't just horseback riding, extreme cycling and shooting contests, he adds, but "seeing what's in people's hearts" as they go through their adventures together. Getting ready for its fourth season, "Ultimate Choice TV" is produced by Empowerment Media, a Christian-backed production company in Jacksonville. John Laurence, president of Empowerment Media, is on hand for the filming of the show's next 13 episodes, "Ultimate Choice TV Wild West Adventure," shot in Grant County and slated to run in September.



Nhadya, the self-described "girlie-girl" of the cast.

"We're the Anti-MTV," Laurence says. "There are enough bad role models out there, shows that tell kids that choosing premarital sex and taking drugs are normal teen behavior." He describes "UC-TV" as a "moral alternative," encouraging young people to make positive choices and avoid the consequences of bad ones. Shown on more than 150 independent television stations around the country, mostly those affiliated with the former WB network, the show currently is not

broadcast in New Mexico. But Laurence says he hopes the advent of the "Ultimate Choice Wild West" segments will help Empowerment Media to secure a Fox Channel affiliate in the Albuquerque area, which would enable Grant County viewers to see it via Comcast cable. "UC-TV" is broadcast on Sunday mornings at 8 a.m. on KKWB channel 65 in El Paso, viewable in Las Cruces.

In addition to thrill-filled adventures and fireside chats, each day on the show includes a motivational talk led by Drew Edwards—referred to as "Dr. Drew" by the cast and staff. Edwards is a behavioral health researcher, trainer, author and Christian counselor with a doctorate in education.

He joined the "UC-TV" team as a writer and consultant in 2002. In addition to developing content for the show and writing for episodes, he describes his role as "a designated dad," on site to protect the young people and offer guidance, particularly when the subjects of drugs or sex come up.

Edwards feels strongly about the show's mission and approach, which he calls "a stealth Christian operation."

He explains, "It has to be exciting to get and keep their attention, and the message is that self-control is possible. You don't have to have sex or get addicted."

The show also has two cool co-hosts, one male and one female, who lead discussions and make themselves available to the youths. Courtenay Bowser, in her mid-20s, is a youth leader and entrepreneur, and the executive director of Shoshannah Arts, a Christian art and dance studio she founded six years ago in Jacksonville. She teaches dance and drama in Jacksonville, and travels around the world as a motivational speaker and dance teacher. The other co-host, Sean Yost, is a youth pastor and creator of *YouthQuake Live*, a sort of Christian stage version of "Saturday Night Live," featuring comedy skits, music and other entertainment geared to and performed and produced by teenagers. In its eighth season, the project also now features a weekly radio show.

All sporting cowboy hats and Western duds, purchased at Circle Heart clothing store in Silver City the night they hit town, the cast members depart the dining hall for the horse corrals. The "UC-TV" crew is checking the conditions, deciding whether to shoot an

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outdoor segment or one of those fireside end-of-the-day chats. Horses stand at ease, handlers at the ready.

Three athletic-looking young men stand in a group, talking about their horseback-riding experience earlier in the day.

Brandon, a sophomore baseball player at the University of Florida, has won several national awards for his courageous comeback after a vicious, near-fatal attack his freshman year. He has strong feelings about the message the show might bring to other youths.

"Bottom line, it's about the Man upstairs," he says, pointing to the sky. "He's guiding us through good times and bad." Brandon was recruited for the show when Laurence came to his school.

Kris, the young football player standing next to Brandon, nods in agreement. Formerly a Floridian, Kris is now in his second year at South Carolina State, and met Laurence through his former basketball coach. The three walk across the paddock toward the horses.

Nhadya, an attractive young black woman, steps gingerly around the mud puddles, all the while tugging on the chin string of her cowboy hat.

"I'm a girlie-girl," she says with a roll of her huge dark eyes. Getting up on a horse was a challenge, she says, one she couldn't have achieved without the encouragement of the others and Dr. Drew's message about "perseverance."

Nhadya came to the show through a connection with her church, the Arlington Assembly of God. The message of the show, she says, "is not 'let's make everybody Christians,' but that there are other ways to have fun." A sophomore at the University of Florida, Nhadya says she wants to be a television sports sideline reporter.

Other cast members include Amber, a college sophomore and national-caliber diver who recently decided to quit school to become a missionary; Paul, a college freshman and highly recruited baseball player from Tampa; Savannah, a swimmer who just completed her sophomore year; and Jessica, an athletic surfer and self-described "adventure seeker." Co-host Bowser says the show strives to cast articulate, energetic youths of good moral character. This grouping "just happens to be all Christian," she says.

These kids also all seem to have been around the block. They willingly share their tougher life experiences—stories of drugs, eating disorders, drinking, depression and the difficulties of being raised by a single parent. They are quick to point out how their struggles developed in them a strength of character, brought them to a point of realization and grace.

The film crew decides there is too much mist and too little light to continue shooting outdoors, and the call is made to shoot a discussion-group segment in the cantina, a rustic building on the ranch property with a fireplace and heavy wooden furnishings. Laurence directs a cameraman to get a light kit out of one of the vehicles and tells the co-hosts to corral the cast members.

"Have them make their 'U shape,'" Laurence says to co-host Bowser, referring to a semi-circle that puts the youths in a configuration easy to film and record.

The eight young people gather on couches and chairs, chatting about the day's events, getting to know each other. The two co-hosts sit on stools in the middle of the elongated semi-circle. Cameramen find perches on which to sit and film; soundmen hold boom

microphones over the youths' heads, one adjusting and readjusting the angle of his equipment, trying to avoid hitting the Mountain Dew soda machine to his rear.

Bowser shuffles papers, looking over her notes for the upcoming discussion.

"We know what we're looking for," she says. "We have things we need them to say, and I have to help them get there. It's television, after all, and there's a goal here. My job is to keep them from going down all those rabbit paths."

Co-host Yost says the topic for this segment is "fitting in," how young people fall victim to peer pressure in order to be accepted and fit into social groups.

Producer Laurence beckons to a young man on the couch, then tells him that a white shirt isn't ideal for the television camera. Two young men go to change their shirts. One young woman fluffs her hair forward and over her shoulders, and another laughs animatedly, obviously enjoying her position on the couch between two of the young men.

The two formerly white-shirted young men return in colored tees and take their seats.

Almost ready to roll, Laurence calls for attention and gives instruction. This is a make-up session, a first-night-together conversation that should have been taped yesterday, except for the group's late arrival and travel weariness.

"The context is last night. You shouldn't make any references to what you've done today," Laurence says. "No references to the horses. You haven't been on the horses. This is last night, your first night in town."

One of the boom holders make a last-minute reminder that cell phones must be off, and the cameras start rolling.

Yost starts off the conversation with an enthusiastic "So here we are in New Mexico" and mentions the trip from Phoenix. He begins to guide the conversation toward its topical goal by talking about "feeling a little awkward" in a new place. He asks the young people if they've ever felt pressure to "fit in."

Nhadya shares some of her own experience with peer pressure, at times really high, and the choices she has made to fit in with others.

Yost makes a reference to the outfitting session at the Circle Heart and "trying on different styles."

Leo, the smiley Brazilian, picks up the thread. "Putting on \$100 cowboy boots doesn't make me a cowboy," he says. He describes his experiences of making friends through a false persona, wearing a mask of sorts, and how he still felt alone, even though he'd made the friends he thought he'd wanted.

Yost nods encouragingly, coaxing Leo to go on. That experience led to a bout with depression, the young man adds.

Paul, one of the baseball players, tells a story of how he faked drinking alcohol in a social setting because he wanted to be thought of as cool. Several in the group laugh and begin telling stories of parties and other social settings, and the conversation drifts into talking about music.

Co-host Bowser brings the group back to topic by drawing on previously mentioned comments on depression and aloneness. "Feeling whole" segues into self-esteem and body image.

A pretty blonde mentions her struggle with an eating disorder. "I responded to that attention," she says. Several nod in acknowledgement when she gives the example of magazines and other media that define what beauty is in a limited and often unattainable

way. To the obvious shock of all in the room, she says five of her high-school girlfriends "got boob jobs as graduation presents."

The girl with the fluffy hair denounces the girls' cosmetic surgery as ridiculous. "Who can make a decision like that? We're all changing, all the time," she says. "I mean, I'm still growing," she adds with a vague gesture to her own breasts, then pumps a fist with an enthusiastic "Yes!"

The group laughs and co-host Yost looks down and humorously shakes his head, feigning embarrassment.

The blonde goes back to talking about her eating disorder, admitting it was not about beauty for her, but control.

"Stop!" One of the soundmen calls a halt to the action. The long handle of his boom microphone has been hitting the Mountain Dew machine, and he's been picking up the creaking, squeaking noises from the wicker basket on which one of the cameramen is sitting. The crew shuffles machinery, fine-tuning their positions.

Dr. Drew raises his hands toward the semicircle. "Let's not get out of the moment," he says, trying to keep the young people from losing their reference point and the conversational tone. Two crewmen shove the Mountain Dew machine back a foot or so and the one cameraman finds a non-squeaky cooler to sit on.

Laurence steps forward. "Hang on, hang on," he intones in a deliberately steady voice, commanding the teens' attention. The crewmen have assumed their new posts and are ready to roll.

"Silence," Laurence calls. Then, as if on comedic cue, he noisily drops his clipboard with a whole sheaf of rustling papers.

The room cracks up. Laurence laughs at himself, and tells everyone to get it out of their systems. A few deep breaths and the cameras are rolling again.

The blonde girl, without missing a beat, launches right back into her story about her eating disorder. The girls ask the guys about their perspective and the conversation takes off. A couple of cast members come close to tears. Others offer reassuring touches and nods.

A soundman suddenly coughs, drawing all eyes in the room. The young people look at Laurence for direction.

"Keep rolling," he instructs the crew. "Everybody good. . . okay. . . okay," he tells the cast members.

The group picks up their conversation and goes off on tangents relating to their theme of fitting in. One brings up true friends; another talks about associating with bad influences. A girl with skin the color of café au lait talks about losing her mother and bonding with a classmate who'd also lost hers. Their bonding turned out to be not so positive, however, as they both got into drug habits. The girls learned how to manipulate their teachers, lies got bigger and bigger, and they traded old friends for a rougher crowd. Eventually, she says, she reached a point "where my eyes were opened to the truth. I tell you, I cried. *I bawled.*"

The group really gets into this and several members are speaking at once, obviously not making for good television. Co-host Bowser, seeking to refocus the conversation, begins to ask the group a question. She stumbles over her words, starts over, then shakes her head.

"I'm off on a wrong tack," she says.

"Take a look at your notes," Laurence instructs. The group sits silently as Bowser looks at her clipboard of notes on the table behind her, then turns back to the group.

"Okay, then," Bowser says brightly, then asks her conversation-steering question.

The young people talk animatedly. Perhaps sensing good footage here and there in certain interactions and comments, Bowser looks toward Laurence and gives a smile or faint nod of acknowledgement. The eight youths who met each other for the first time just a few days ago are laughing easily with each other. Maybe it's easy for them at their young and sociable ages. Maybe it's the commonality of their Christian lifestyles.

Already they seem to be friends.

Co-host Yost sees his opportunity to conclude the session. He recaps a couple of key points, nodding at the young people, looking them in the eye and addressing them by name.

"Ultimately," he tells them, "the choice is yours."

For more information on the show, Ultimate Choice TV, visit www.ultimatechoicetv.com, and for more information on Empowerment Media, go to www.empowermentmedia.tv.

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