Home School Cover Girl

By Jessica Slickers (with Susan K. Marlow)

“Say cheese!”

I brushed a stray hair out of my eyes and tried to look relaxed.

“Come on, Jessica. A couple more shots and we’ll call it a day.”

I smiled as Susan snapped one picture after another with her digital camera. It wasn’t unusual to have my picture taken, but today it had become a special event. Things had changed. Even my name was different. Sixteen-year-old “Jessica Slickers” had been transformed into twelve-year-old Andrea Carter and had acquired a beautiful palomino horse named Taffy.

When I agreed to let my homeschooling teacher friend snap a few pictures, I never dreamed I would end up on the front covers of the Circle C Adventures, a Christian book series for ’tweens. I am the oldest of seven children in a homeschooling family living in rural western Washington. Our family has homeschooled for as long as I can remember. Some people may think that my parents’ choice to homeschool us would result in our family becoming socially “deprived.” However, I have never found homeschooling to be boring or lacking in opportunities. Through homeschooling I’ve had the privilege of meeting many special people with unique talents. I’ve even met several authors! Susan Marlow is one of these special people.

Susan was always writing stories when I was a little girl. After reading her hand-typed creations, I would give her my ten-year-old opinion. I especially enjoyed her western stories about a girl named Andi Carter. I always dreamed of having my own horse, so I felt like jumping into the saddle and galloping off with Andi and her horse, Taffy, whenever I read about Andi’s adventures in the Wild West of 1880s California. Each time I returned a story, I encouraged Susan to try and get the books published.

It was the beginning of an exciting journey.

In 2004, Susan told me she had sent the manuscript of her first book, Andrea Carter and the Long Ride Home, to Kregel Publications and they had accepted it! I was so excited at the news, but I wasn’t prepared for what happened next.

Susan felt that the form she was filling out to describe her character did not adequately convey to her publisher how she pictured Andi. In desperation, she asked if I would wear western clothes and allow her to snap a couple of pictures. “Jessica,” she said, “you’re the only girl I know who looks like Andi. You’re full of life, just like she is. Besides, you’ve read the books. You know Andi. You’re the perfect model for this.” After swallowing my surprise—and talking it over with my mother—I happily agreed.

Susan’s plan was to give the marketing folks at Kregel an idea of what her “Andi” character looked liked, from which they could draw a cover. A photo seemed the best way to do that. We assumed Kregel would use the picture as a model for an illustration. We never dreamed they would use the photo on the front cover of Long Ride Home! Imagine my shock when two months before the release date Susan told me she’d seen her soon-to-be-released book at an on-line bookstore. “Jessica,” she said in a shaking voice, “you aren’t going to believe this, but you’re on the cover of the book.”

Modeling for the covers has been, and still is, an unforgettable experience—full of laughter, horses, new friends, and an education. Susan came to our farmhouse for that first photo session wearing a pair of faded overalls and her little grandson’s cowboy hat. I threw on my overall jumper and plaid shirt. Susan braided my hair and tousled it a bit for a windblown, tomboy “Andi” look. After that, we headed outside. All went
well until Susan sat on a small fence to relax and take a shot of me under a tree. Then crash! The railing collapsed. She tumbled to the ground. The camera went flying. Unknown to Susan, it was a decorative fence, held up by only two nails. My sisters and brothers, who refused to be left out of such exciting events, rolled on the ground with laughter. They followed us around during the entire photo shoot.

There have been moments of panic. Andrea Carter and the Long Ride Home is the first of a series. The second book was on its way to the publisher when we realized we had no more pictures. Susan scrambled to find a palomino horse to model Taffy for the second book, and soon we were deep into another photo session. That’s when my moment of panic hit. Susan had sewed a Victorian dress for me to wear, which included—unfortunately—puffed sleeves. I’m not Anne of Green Gables; I despise puffed sleeves. The dress also had a huge sash and a high, lacy collar. I really, really did not want to wear that dress, but for Susan’s sake I went along with it. Thankfully, we also took pictures in western clothes. Much to my relief, Kregel chose the western pose for Andrea Carter and the Dangerous Decision, which was released in January 2007.

My entire family has thrown themselves into this unique opportunity. My little sister, Esther, and my brother, Jarrett, along with some other homeschoolers have all posed for possible future covers. Mom always has a scrumptious lunch ready for us when we are finished taking pictures, and her yummy chocolate chip cookies are never far from reach. Our neighbor is happy to volunteer her horses for the covers. Our small town ran a feature article on the front page of the newspaper about my role as a cover girl. Friends from as far away as Canada have said, “I saw your picture on a book at the store.”

Being a cover girl has been a special event in my life and in the lives of my family, friends, church, and our community. I’m not sure when the opportunity to keep modeling as “Andi” will end, or if I even want it to. We’ve taken dozens—actually hundreds—of pictures for other books in the Circle C Adventures. The series has expanded to include Andrea Carter and the Family Secret and Andrea Carter and the San Francisco Smugglers. Book 5, Andrea Carter and the Trouble with Treasure, was recently accepted for publication. Who knows? Someday when I become a homeschooling mom, one of my children might even have the privilege and fun of seeing themselves on the cover of a book—just like me!