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Locally shot Netflix drama is a G-rated Dawson's Creek meets Friday Night Lights

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Nikki Rodriguez in My Life with the Walter Boys. Courtesy, Netflix

It may seem hard to believe, but American actor Ashby Gentry did not realize his main role in My Life with the Walter Boys would require horseback riding.

So there was a steep learning curve for the young actor when it came to playing Alex Walter on the Alberta-shot series. Alex is perhaps the most bookish and sensitive of the nine boys in the Walter clan, described in the Netflix press material as “a dreamer and an undeniable romantic” and “a devotee of fantasy novels, Star Wars and gaming.” But he has also grown up on a ranch in Colorado, so he is a skilled rider with a talent for horsemanship.

The Phoenix-born Gentry, on the other hand, had only ridden a horse once before showing up on the Alberta set and said the horse “tried to run me into a tree.”

His co-star Noah Lalonde, who plays Alex’s brother Cole, a former high school football star, also had limited equine experience.

“I rode a horse once when I was 10 and I was actually flipped off the back of it,” said the Michigan-born actor. “There was a lot of trauma I had to sift before coming here.”

The interviews were done on a sweltering day in August 2022, when Gentry and Lalonde joined dozens of extras as part of a rodeo scene being shot at the Girletz Rodeo Ranch north of Calgary. It required Gentry to show off his newly acquired riding skills. During the six months of filming, he was put under the tutelage of the iconic wrangler, stuntman and genuine cowboy John Scott – the same industry veteran who taught Brad Pitt how to ride a horse and was once Gene Hackman’s stunt double – and wranglers Mark Nugent and Bailey Mylan. Soon, Gentry was spending much of his off-time on the back of a steed, often on the CL Ranch west of Calgary which stands in for the Walter homestead.



Nikki Rodriguez and Ashby Gentry in *My Life With the Walter Boys*. Courtesy, Netflix.

“We’d be riding around the ranch looking for stuff,” said Gentry. “We found these big-ass buffalo skulls. Mark Nugent and Bailey Mylan are like real cowboys, so they know how to scope it all out. The horses are on set and I’ll pester the second assistant director all the time, I’ll say ‘Hey Emily, I notice that I don’t work two days this week. Can we get a riding lesson in?’ If the

horses are on set, they will be there the whole day but if they're not used in a scene then we can take them out. It's like off-roading on a horse. It's the best."

It's a good thing that the actors playing the Walter boys became well-versed in horsemanship because it adds a needed layer of authenticity to the fish-out-of-water premise of *My Life with the Walter Boys*. Based on the Young Adult novel by Ali Novak, Netflix's long-gestating series will finally be making its debut on Dec. 7. The story revolves around Manhattanite Jackie Howard, played by Nikki Rodriguez, a sophisticated teen who loses her parents in an accident and is forced to live on a Colorado ranch with her mother's old friend Dr. Katherine Walter, played by Sarah Rafferty. She is married to kind-hearted but gruff rancher George, played by Marc Blucas, and they live in a big ranch house with 10 rambunctious Walter siblings, nine of whom are boys. That includes Alex and Cole, who both fall for Jackie and subsequently spend much of the series "at each other's throats," Gentry says.

Like her co-stars, Rodriguez had limited experience on a horse, but that helped with her character development.

"I was learning as Jackie was learning," she said. "So that was cool and interesting. It's been so much fun. It's one of my favourite things to do now, ride horses. It's so therapeutic."

Messy love triangles and horses, however, do not fit into what Jackie had assumed would be her life.



Nikki Rodriguez and Ashby Gentry in *My Life with the Walter Boys*. Photo courtesy of Netflix.

“Jackie is super driven and super goal-oriented,” says Rodriguez. “She is on this seemingly perfect life trajectory. She gets taken out of and placed in a whole new world and family where she doesn’t feel she belongs. So it’s her navigating a whole new life and new school and then she gets stuck in this love triangle. It’s a lot she is dealing with.”

Co-produced by Calgary’s Nomadic Pictures, *My Life with the Walter Boys* seems a project custom-built for Alberta. In addition to the CL Ranch and Girletz, multiple locations in Crossfield and Cochrane were used and interiors were shot at the Rocky Mountain Film Studio in Calgary in the summer of 2022.

With its focus on ranch life, horses, teen romance and family dynamics, comparisons to CBC’s *Heartland*, Canada’s longest-running hour-long drama, are inevitable. Showrunner Melanie Halsall said producers were very conscious of *Heartland* and deliberately stayed clear of locations associated with that series. She also said the *Walter Boys* has several plot and thematic elements. She actually pitched it to Netflix as *Dawson’s Creek* meets *Friday Night Lights* with hints of *Party of Five* and *My So-Called Life*.

“The show is also about American football, we have a lot of big school stuff,” Halsall says. “It’s about our youth, so it’s about the kids. So a lot of what we shoot is in school and it’s also about a family. The rodeo is only a small part of it. It’s not the main component of our show. So I think in that respect, it’s different than *Heartland* in its look and feel.”

Still, there is likely to be some overlap in audience. While the tragic accident that takes the life of Jackie’s parents may initially drive the premise of the series, Halsall says *My Life With the Walter Boys* is not a dark coming-of-age tale and is aimed at a broad demographic.

“What I always wanted to write was a show that a 15-year-old girl could watch and she could sit and watch it with her 45-year-old dad and neither of them would want to turn it off because they are embarrassed by anything,” Halsall says. “So it’s a very positive story. It’s treated with a lot of lightness and it’s all about hope and family and that sort of thing.”

My Life With the Walter Boys starts streaming on Dec. 7 on Netflix.