Gwen Peace

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — There are 560.4 miles separating Brandywine, Maryland, and Lexington, Kentucky.

That's approximately nine hours of nonstop driving on a route that takes you first through a major city and then along an infamously steep mountain road before finally depositing you in the rolling green pastures of Northern Kentucky.

For anyone, it's a daunting drive. But for Karen McManis, a 52-year-old political consultant from Washington, D.C., there was an added layer of complexity — she was towing a horse trailer behind her.

Her two young children, avid horseback riders, had been competing all summer at shows and had their sights set on a championship series show at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, one of the biggest venues in the country.

There was one problem with that though — Kentucky was far and it was expensive. Commercial horse shipping typically runs at about $3 per mile. With two horses and 560 miles to go, she was looking at a cost of about $3,360 each way. It simply was not feasible.

So, in an effort to appease her children, she volunteered to drive the horses herself, towing a two-horse trailer behind her the entire way — something she had never done before.

What could go wrong?

Sept. 7, 2019 — 5:30 a.m.

The sun hadn't risen yet but she had.

Today was the day they were leaving for Kentucky. The monumentality of the task hadn't set in yet, instead, she was filled with the kind of anxious excitement that floods your stomach right before embarking on a road trip.

She woke up the kids and checked one last time to make sure everybody had what they needed packed and in the car. On the way to the barn, where the horses were boarded, they stopped at a little country store for coffee and donuts.

"It was a beautiful day," she said. "Perfect weather. We got to the barn just as the sun was rising and I was feeling so positive and excited that we were about to do this."

The girls hopped out of the car and helped her hitch the trailer to the truck, something they had been practicing over the past week. It went seamlessly, and soon the horses were loaded and they were pulling out of the gravel driveway, behind the three other horse trailers and trucks that were also making the journey down to Lexington.

"Everything went perfect until it didn't," she said. "It started not going perfect at about 8:30 in the morning."

Sept. 7, 2019 — 8:30 a.m.

A tire was rolling across the highway.

At first it was funny, the sight of a lone tire bouncing jovially across the interstate. As it came to a rest at the side of the road it wasn't funny anymore.

McManis looked in her review mirrors frantically. It wasn't her tire. Instant relief. Then, she got a call from one of the other members of the convoy.

It was their tire. The group pulled as one to the side of the busy road, slowly driving on the shoulder until they reached a scenic rest stop on the side of the road, where they pulled in.

McManis got out of the car, with her two daughters, and ran over to the damaged trailer, ready to assess the situation. The wheel had not only fallen off but the nuts where one would attach the wheel were completely severed. It was beyond repair, and they were stuck.

Not ready to give up though, they called for help, asking a friend to drop off a new trailer and tow the broken one away.

They waited and waited and waited. By the time help arrived, it was around 2 p.m.

"That was I think when the first little finger of doubt started to enter my mind," she said. "I started doing all the mental math about when exactly we'd get to Kentucky, and it was still possible if we left by noon to be in Kentucky by nine o'clock at night. And then it became by 10 p.m. And then it became 11 p.m. And finally, we started rolling again."

Mcmanis's daughter, Victoria Peace, who was with her remembered waiting at the rest stop.

"I was thinking, Oh, my God, like, I'm not in charge here, but if I was in charge, I'd be freaking out," she said. "After we got through that initially, I think then everybody kind of looked around and realized, okay, we're making it to Kentucky one way or the other. There's no other option."

Sept. 7, 2019 — 5:00 p.m.

Two hours after they had got back on the road, the gas needle on one of the trucks had dropped to zero.

The truck, a used F-250 that ran on diesel, was similar to McManis — it was also on its first trip with a trailer.

The four trailers pulled into the closest gas station in unison, expecting to make a quick stop and be back on the road shortly. Instead, as soon as McManis got out of her own truck, she saw something laying on the ground underneath the F-250.

It was the truck's gas tank. Barely 100 miles into the trip and two vehicles were out of commission.

“That was the first time I really started to doubt myself,” McManis said. “That was really when I realized that this was not going to be an easy journey.”

She called her husband, Chris Peace, who was usually the designated driver.

“I at first thought maybe it was a good idea for them to stop and come back home,” he said. “But we talked it over and she said she felt confident enough driving to continue on.”

With renewed conviction, the women once again phoned for help, and once again waited two more hours for another truck to arrive, before setting off again, just as the sun began to set.

Sept. 7, 2019 — 7:30 p.m.

McManis was finally on the road again, but panic was setting in. It was getting dark and the roads were becoming increasingly steep.

The convoy had just crossed the Cumberland Gap and made its way into West Virginia, following Interstate-68. The deeper they got into the mountains, the more warning signs appeared on the side of the road.

The highway is filled with massive, fluorescent yellow ‘truck warning’ billboards, alerting drivers to the steep grade and winding turns characteristic of the stretch of pavement. It’s infamous in the trucking world for its dangerous nature.

Then came the feelings of self-doubt.

“Did I make a horrible mistake?” McManis wondered, but still, she drove on. “I had to keep up a good face for the other people who were on this journey with us.”

Sept. 8, 2019 — 1 a.m.

They had stopped at another gas station.

This time no one’s gas tank was dragging on the ground, but McManis did discover just how wide trailers turn after almost taking out a gas pump with the back of the rig.

Morale was at an all-time low — the only thing keeping her going was a can of Redbull (the first she had ever drunk) and the new Taylor Swift song that had dropped at midnight.

The song was, ironically, entitled “...Ready For It?” She had never been so ready for something to end in her life.

Three hours to go.

Sept. 8, 2019 — 4 a.m.

Three hours before sunrise, McManis steered the truck and trailer into the gates of the Kentucky Horse Park. It was a ghost town but they had made it.

They unloaded the horses into their stalls and parked the trailer. Finally, after almost 24 hours on the road, she could take a deep breath.

“What surprised me was just to the degree that she that she kind of pushed through,” Victoria Peace said. “Sometimes, even though she's logical, Mom will kind of bail out of things. And with this particular instance, like she would have been so well within her right to do that on, like, four or five separate occasions — I would have understood I wouldn't have blamed her. But she did it.”

The rest of the show went by uneventfully, and the return journey went almost unbelievably smoothly. She had done it, even after almost everything that could have gone wrong.

“I've never felt like I wanted to do that again,” she said. “But if I had to, I felt like I could.”

She kept driving the trailer after that until her kids both eventually went to college. But she continued to think about those 24 hours and all that she had learned from them.

“I think the lesson I learned was to stop working so hard to make things happen for other people and focus a little bit on making things happen for yourself,” she said. “I was trying to participate in the sport of horseback riding by serving all of the auxiliary functions myself. Because of that trip, I instead finally got the courage to just do it I'd always wanted to do and learn how to ride.”

Now, she not only drives the trailer, but she rides the horse inside it too, fulfilling her own childhood dream of riding horses. She also doesn’t give up. If she could make it through that day of driving, where everything that could go wrong did, then she can make it through anything.

She’s a better person for it.