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Abused horses find a second chance at a New Kent County

From Richmond Giving Magazine
by Melissa Scott Sinclair

Nine years ago, Pearl was the first. After 34 years of work had been wrung from her frame, she was left in a backyard to starve.

Then there was Dawn, a skeleton with a hanging head. She weighed 350 pounds -- a third her normal weight -- and her teeth were worn to the bone from gnawing her prison stall.

Chase, a doglike horse who nibbles visitors with an inquisitive mouth, was crippled by untreated arthritis. The man who brought him to Lori Priest told her: "He's useless. I don't know why you want him."

This little farm in New Kent County is a haven for "useless" horses; for the old, the lame and the hurt. Priest takes them all, those surrendered by desperate owners and those seized by local animal control offices.

People often buy a horse without realizing the animal requires more care and attention than their ATV. When vet bills run into the thousands and the horse doesn't immediately submit to being saddled, Priest says, "they just get frustrated and it's either off to the auction or 'you can take him if you want him.'"

[View the audio slideshow.](#)

Sometimes she gets a horse that's beyond saving: too weak, too old or in too much pain. Even then, Priest takes them in for a short time and lavishes them with attention. She calls it giving them some "peace of heart." After a few good days, a few good meals, she calls in the vet to do his work. Last year, Priest says, she took in three horses and seven dogs that had to be put down. "Worst year of my life," she says.

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For every quiet ending there is a happy one -- a rescued horse who finds just the right match. At the moment it's Gunny, a little, wild Colorado mustang who had been mistreated by previous owners. Gunny trusted no one until he met Priest's friend Michele Tabb, who has taught him to accept a halter and a human's touch.

Even a horse that has suffered the vilest abuse is salvageable, Tabb says: "They're not stupid. They're very forgiving." The only exception, Priest says, are horses who have become aggressive toward humans; those animals she cannot help.

Other creatures also have found a home at New Hope. A dozen small dogs and a flock of gobbling, thrumming turkeys greet anyone walking up the driveway. Chickens, goats, three potbellied pigs and an emu named Emma (who was found on a county road, shredded by dogs) patrol the pastures.

Priest officially incorporated her rescue efforts two years ago, forming New Hope Rescue as a 501(c)3 nonprofit. She spends about \$235 per week for feed and hay. A vet bill on initial intake costs \$500 to \$1,000, while rehab and medicine can cost thousands more per horse. Local horse owners and 4-H'ers have conducted benefits for New Hope. And the heart-rending stories on Priest's Web site, www.newhoperescueva.com, have inspired people to send donations from across the country.

Four or five volunteers help out at the farm on a regular basis, and Priest is seeking volunteer trainers who can work with rescued horses.

She has a ready answer to that ubiquitous question: "Why aren't you helping people?" She already is.

"None of these animals know how to make a phone call," she says. It's the owners who seek her help because they're too sick, too broke or too old to keep caring for their horses.

Most owners of mistreated animals don't mean to be cruel, she says. "It's through ignorance." The owners of Dawn, the skeletal mare, carefully brushed her every day. Yet they "just didn't know to feed her," Priest says. She imagines what it must have been like for Dawn to glimpse the green grass through the door every time her owners entered the stall -- a stall she was never allowed to leave.

The future of New Hope, Priest says, is not just as a rescue group, but as a resource to help people take better care of their animals. Sometimes all an owner needs is help repairing a fence, or a few lessons in equine care or even financial assistance to pay for euthanasia, instead of letting a horse starve to death. In the years to come, Priest says, she dreams of having a retirement farm where old horses can happily live out their days.

"You're born with a purpose," she says. "And this is it."



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