



Haven for Horses

Livingston new home to woman with dreams of horse rescue ranch

LIVINGSTON — A 5-pound bag of carrots doesn't last long when five draft horses are chomping away. Neither does a big bale of hay, a bag of alfalfa pellets or a box of apples. "Draft horses do everything in extreme," said Deborah Derr, who has rescued the five animals from slaughter. They eat a lot, drink a lot and produce a lot of manure. But they also give a lot, said Derr, founder and operator of United in Light, a nonprofit organization that rescues elderly draft horses and lets them live out their days in well-nourished comfort.

Derr has big dreams, huge ones. Right now she has 8 acres alongside Interstate 90, but someday she'd like to have 25,000 acres. She wants to be

able to rescue and rehabilitate abused or neglected horses, then adopt them out to good homes. But for now, the focus is on the five gentle giants living in her pasture, animals that will stay here until they “pass over,” as she called it. The organization began in Southern California in 2003, where Derr was a busy doctor of chiropractic medicine who practiced on animals as well as people. That’s where she met Knight, her first draft horse. The white Percheron, with a neck as broad as a beer keg, was in rough shape, suffering from a bad back. “I’d put my hand on his back and he’d jump a foot away,” she recalled. She kept working on him, using chiropractic and Reiki techniques, and the horse started coming around. But there was another problem. Knight’s owners couldn’t keep him any longer. An auction house was in his future, with an abattoir likely to follow. “I was so amazed that he was going to slaughter, that nobody wanted him any more,” she said. So, at the age of 37, she took the horse and changed her own life. “I thought if I was going to start any dreams, this was the time to do it,” she said. Eventually, she sold most of her practice, moved to northern Arizona and acquired more horses. In May, she came to Livingston and horses keep coming to her.

Moonshadow is one of the newer arrivals. A huge Belgian gelding, his nose bears scars from years of wearing an ill-fitting halter, while jammed into an undersize stall in a New York barn, a place where he never even saw daylight. Other horses include a brace of Belgians named Jackson and Pumpkin, saved from an auction yard in Pennsylvania, and an ancient, lumbering horse that Derr calls Tatanka, an arthritic animal whose feet shake when he lifts them, but one who clearly enjoys his daily treats of carrots or apples.

Story by SCOTT McMILLION Photography by SEAN SPERRY of the Chronicle

None of the horses are ridden or harnessed, but they get plenty of interaction with people. Derr offers clinics that offer visitors a chance to groom the horses and bond with them. Some of those people have never interacted with horses and others have had bad experiences they want to overcome.

“It’s a trust thing,” she said of those sessions. People learn how to embrace a gigantic animal, to breathe with it. “Animals are like a mirror. They reflect our own fears and insecurities.”

Horse sanctuaries are badly needed in this country, said Kayo Fraser, who, with her husband, Alex, runs a horse-driving school in Deer Lodge.

“There’s an explosion in need for rescue facilities,” she said.

People often find themselves with horses that are unneeded, unwanted

or dangerous, and the traditional way of handling them has been to put them down or send them to slaughter, Fraser said.

“People who have owned them don’t know what to do with them,” she said. “They have to go somewhere.”

Traditionally, more than 100,000 horses a year have been sent to slaughterhouses, Fraser said.

“If somebody’s there to do what they can with what resources they have, more power to them,” she said of Derr’s operation.

Derr knows she can’t save all the horses, but she’s doing what she can: actively seeking funding and volunteers, contributing earnings from her chiropractic practice, selling photographs and note cards and other items. Keeping the animals costs about \$4,000 a year, per horse, she said. And as word of her operation gets out, people call and e-mail all the time, offering horses. She can’t take them all. “That’s the hardest thing,” she said.

“Saying no.”

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Derr gives her first rescued horse, Knight, a carrot in the United in Light Draft Horse Sanctuary in Livingston.

Scars from a bridle that was rarely taken off by the horse's previous owner can still be seen on Moonbeam.

