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CRANE MOUNTAIN RESCUE GIVES THE DOWN AND OUT A SECOND CHANCE

by Elisabeth Ward

EDDIE MROZIK and Nancy Van Wie were driving through Pennsylvania in winter 2004 after transporting a horse to Maryland when they noticed first the auction, then the downed horse in a kill pen with three hundred head of cattle. The animal was severely undernourished and covered with excrement; its poor condition included open sores and parasitic infestations.

Most who attend these auctions pack their purchases into overcrowded, filthy trucks to be slaughtered for animal feed and glue. Mrozik and Van Wie, though, were not in search of meat. They paid \$235, urged their lone horse to its feet and half-led, half-rolled him onto their trailer—five hundred pounds of animal in such crisis that he remained limp for the entire journey. Once home, Mrozik and Van Wie disassembled the trailer to get the horse (which they discovered to be a stallion) to his feet and into a stall. This is nothing new for the couple, who run Crane Mountain Valley Horse Rescue, the only horse rescue farm in northern New York.

Horses grazing or romping in a field and the comforting sounds and smells of a barn are part of our heritage. But what about those fifty thousand to a hundred thousand equines commercially slaughtered each year for simply no longer being useful? Crane Mountain rescue's mission is to give abused, abandoned and slaughter-bound horses a second chance by providing shelter, care, emotional and physical rehabilitation, and adoption into approved homes. To prevent the neglect that led to the problem, the organi-



Big Red, undernourished and sickly, when he arrived at the farm.

Top: A healthy Big Red returned to his racehorse glory.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Nancy Van Wie

zation instructs potential adopters, stressing responsibility and patience, as well as overall good animal husbandry. "If we, in a small way, can help horses and help people through our education and outreach programs with horses to learn kindness and compassion for other beings, then we are fulfilling our philosophical and

spiritual beliefs," says Van Wie.

NANCY VAN WIE grew up on a farm near Troy and has been riding since the age of three. Her lifelong interest is evident all over the Crane Mountain rescue barn. Her first pitchfork hangs on the wall near the old trunk that holds the brush she used from childhood through her days at the University of Vermont (UVM), where she established a riding program. Just outside is her first wheelbarrow. She still has the English saddle from her first pony, Gingo.

After UVM Van Wie went to the State University of New York at Albany for a master's degree in business administration, becoming a consultant in the startup of small businesses and nonprofits. An injury at twenty-four exacerbated two congenital spinal problems (spina bifida and scoliosis) that would have sidelined most people, and Van Wie was told never to ride again. She was hired as chief fund-raiser at Silver Bay Association, the YMCA's conference center on Lake George, where she remained for seven years before taking a similar job at the Keene Valley-based Adirondack Nature Conservancy & Adirondack Land Trust.

Eddie Mrozik spent his Brooklyn youth hanging out at Aqueduct Race-track, in Jamaica, Long Island, where as a seven-year-old he volunteered by walking horses after their early-morning workouts. He became an architectural sheet-metal foreman, working on the Statue of Liberty, the World Trade Center and, finally, the copper roof at Silver Bay Association. During his time on Lake George, Mrozik heard that the Silver Bay development director liked horses; he missed being around them and asked Van Wie if he could accompany her on a visit to Poesy, a Trakehner mare she had recently purchased. Bred for dressage but born with a bacterial infection in her hock, Poesy associated people with pain and became vicious.

Van Wie had already made her way back into the saddle astride a supposedly smooth-riding Paso Fino with a reputation for returning alone from trail rides. Told Poesy's owner would consider selling her to anyone who could go into the horse's stall and work with her, Van Wie accomplished, and discovered, her mission.

On Mrozik's first visit to Poesy, Van Wie recognized his sixth sense around a horse, what she calls "emotionability"—the way one locks into an animal's attention and intentions.

Mrozik, part Native American, grew up in a strong tradition of ap-

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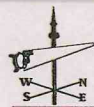


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prenticeship, which carried over into his metalwork. He felt it was time to intertwine that concept of hands-on work with his horse sense. Plus, Mrozik and Van Wie found more in common than their love of horses: in 2002 they purchased a Warren County farm over the Internet and two years later they were married on their hillside property, in Thurman.

It took the couple a year to fix up the barns and hundred-year-old farmhouse, establish their nonprofit status, develop connections to the rescue community and create their website (www.cmvhr.org), putting Crane Mountain Valley Horse Rescue in business on July 1, 2003. Soon twenty-three acres of pasture were dotted with horses of every size, breed, color and condition. They came from slaughter auctions, donations or calls from sources such as veterinarians and the state police. Today the farm's list of accomplishments includes upwards of forty horses adopted to families throughout the North Country and as far away as Maine and Long Island. These animals go to couples nearing retirement, families with another horse in need of companionship or a child in need of the same.

Many rescue operations around the country, no matter the good intentions, do no more than supply a temporary shelter. Horses that make it to Crane Mountain rescue are screened and receive medical care, including x-rays if necessary. The rescue's hundred-thousand-dollar annual budget breaks down to five hundred per horse for the first three months, when the animal may need a special diet to compensate for poor health and to bring it slowly to the proper weight. After that stabilization period it costs two to three hundred dollars per horse per month. Always, there's personal attention. Says Mrozik, "We practice management through personality, through ground-work and the building of trust and respect in order to relieve stress."

The first horses Mrozik and Van Wie purchased were a starving mare,

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Beauty, and her tiny foal, Esprit. Soon Remington came from a slaughter auction where Mrozik sensed the horse's eyes trailing him. He began bidding, and after bringing the animal home, found a forehead fracture he believes resulted from a deliberate blow. Another horse, J.D., was a barrel racer banished from the rodeo when his performance waned. J.D. became Mrozik's pet when Mrozik, brushing him, heard a *pop* and realized a dislocated hip had slipped into place. Finally someone knew the constant agony the horse had suffered. J.D. began following Mrozik like a large—very large—puppy.

Van Wie and Mrozik receive support from veterinary services and others in the horse community. Battenkill Veterinary Equine, in Ballston Spa, responds immediately to such problems as J.D.'s hip and the inner-ear infection that put his paddock-mate, Dotson, a champion eventer, out of commission. Although Dotson's decline was obvious, the infection was not. It traveled into his face, leaving him blind in one eye and with facial paralysis that prevents him from swiveling his left ear. He's responsive to affection, including a gentle massage of his hide-covered eye socket. He is so responsive that he's become a therapy horse at the farm. Says Hannah, a visually impaired eight-year-old rider who frequently visits, "Dotson makes me believe there isn't anything in this world I can't do."

Farriers and equine dentists are regular visitors. Van Wie and Mrozik hold workshops including these experts as well as clinics in natural horsemanship—where a rider works with a horse so that each gains an understanding of the other's actions. Here, horse owners, lawn chair equine enthusiasts or potential adopters can observe the techniques and personality assessment that make the rescue's program succeed.

Neighbors assume that since Van Wie and Mrozik rescue horses, the couple won't turn away other animals

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in need. Three dogs, found at separate times on their doorstep, a cage of breeding quail, several cages of rabbits and a kitten abandoned just shy of six weeks reside in the house and nearest pens.

Freckles the Holstein steer was saved from a veal auction when he was three days old. His eyes follow Van Wie's every move, as J.D.'s follow Mrozik's. Like the kitten, Freckles seems sure Van Wie is his mother. It should make a certain amount of sense to Freckles—his sisters are two goats: Lyric has no lymph nodes and was house-raised when orphaned as a kid seven years ago, and Aurora was rescued from slaughter.

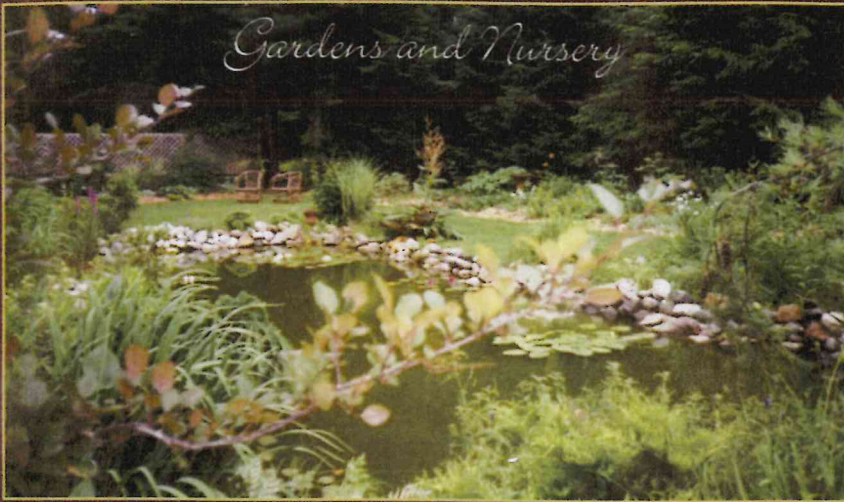
BACK TO THAT winter evening when Mrozik and Van Wie returned from Pennsylvania with the downed stallion in their trailer. They were able to clean him up and, because of the tattoo on the inside of his upper lip, recognized Aspen as a thoroughbred, a grandson of Secretariat by a daughter of Northern Dancer.

Not all broken-down thoroughbreds are slaughter-bound. Bowed tendons sent Beau, a big, strong, four-year-old gelding, from the racetrack to Crane Mountain rescue with the intention of rehabilitation and adoption, but his owner also provided a year's worth of donations for upkeep. Beau's recovery brought a renewed level of energy, and one spring afternoon he zipped out the barn door to the fenced pastures, into the open air. Van Wie, tipping the scales somewhere around 115 pounds, ordered him back to his stall. He reared, nicking her on the shoulder. She brought out her "space extender," a long slender stick, from the corner of the barn and tapped him on the foot when he reared again. Beau immediately stood quietly and looked at her. How did she do that? How had she reached so far? He returned to the barn and dipped into his stall.

"The danger is in being around them, not in being with them," Mrozik says of his charges. "All ani-

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imals can be unpredictable." He laughs. "*Unpredictable*. We use that word a lot. It usually says we don't know what people are going to do. If we knew that, we'd know how the horse would react."

Last August the leg injury that threatened to turn Aspen from race-horse to horsemeat had to be mended for his rehabilitation to be complete. His confidence and conformation restored, Aspen was ready for surgery. Sadly, a postoperative twisted intestine and resulting shock led to euthanization; he is now buried on that Thurman hillside under a memorial plaque. Were those eight months at Crane Mountain rescue worth it? They were to Aspen. And they were to Mrozik and Van Wie. "It's not his bones that are important," says Van Wie, "but his memory and his spirit."

Both are likely to remain. Mrozik and Van Wie bred Aspen to Poesy before his surgery. That foal, a colt resembling his father, was born March 7 at Crane Mountain rescue's new home, in Westport: forty-three acres with a 150-year-old farmhouse on the north side of Route 9N, allowing the farm to almost double its acreage and thereby increase its rescue capacity. Of greater impact is Van Wie's shorter commute to Keene Valley. With no paid staff, Mrozik's 24/7 farm life will benefit from another twelve hours per week of help from his wife.

Hands-on apprenticeship continues as students come weekly to clean stalls, oil tack and do paddock or farm chores, or even fund-raising and mailing projects. Forty volunteers ranging in age from seven to eighty-three helped Crane Mountain rescue during the first year. Many of those plan to help at the Westport facility, and new neighbors are stepping forward.

Van Wie's motto is, "I can't save them all, but I'm saving this one." She could be speaking for the horses or the people who work on their behalf. Crane Mountain rescues come from all directions. 🐾



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