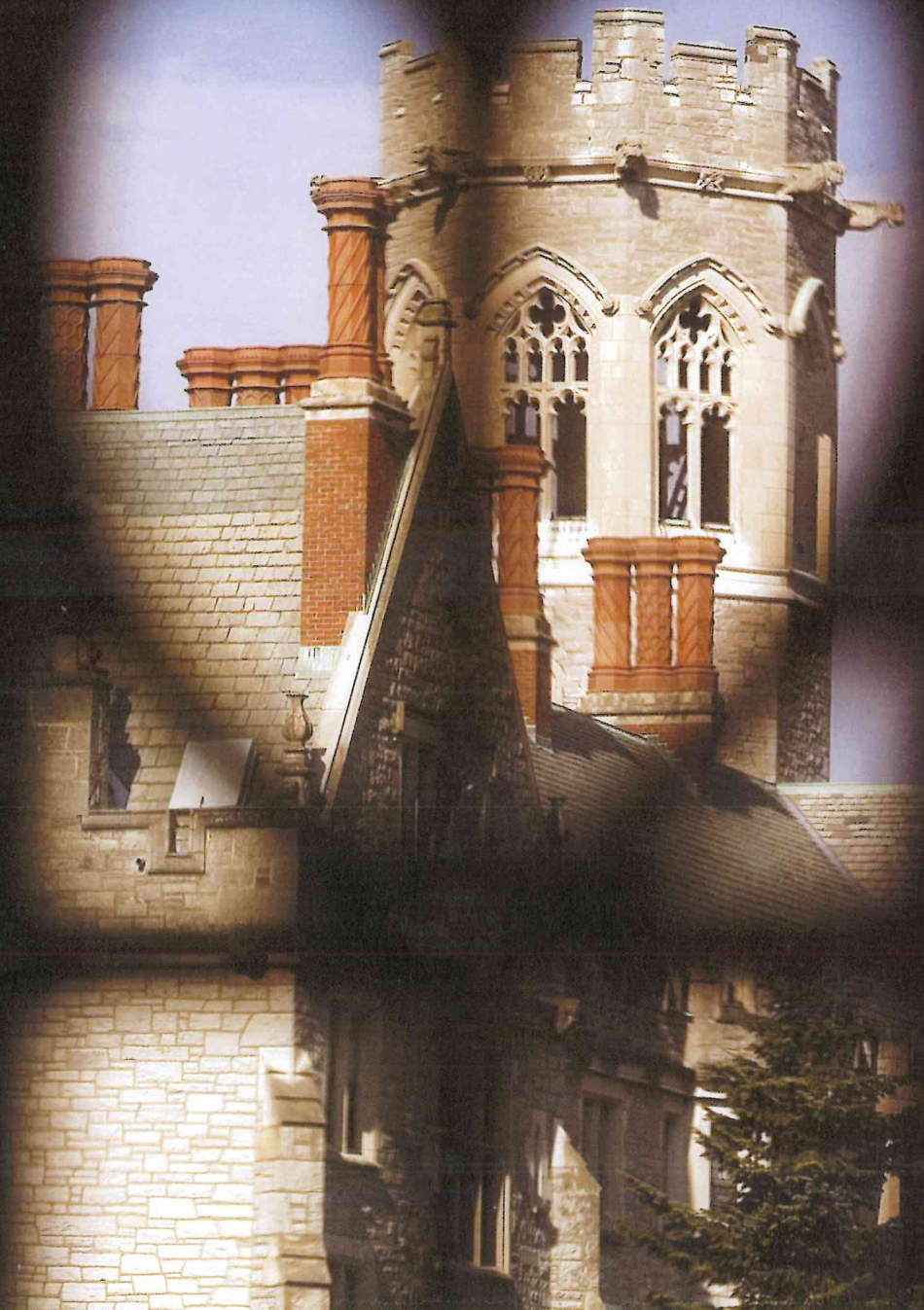


EMMA

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THE BULLETIN OF EMMA WILLARD SCHOOL



SECOND CHANCE



Unwanted
horses find a
home in the
Adirondacks

When Nancy Van Wie '82 first met Aspen in 2004 he was the lone horse standing in the middle of 300 head of cattle marked for slaughter. It was a frigid January day and the horse was breathing on a block of ice, using his warm breath to melt drinking water. Covered in cow manure and open sores, he was eating twigs, probably the only food he'd had in quite some time given the way his ribs were poking through his worn coat.

Story and photos
by Steven Ricci

Van Wie asked a young worker at the cow auction if she could purchase the neglected horse and was told, "Oh, he ain't worth nothing." She handed him all the cash she had, \$235, and led the horse to the trailer that she and husband Eddie Mrozik had been using to transport horses before they stopped at the auction. They had barely loaded Aspen onto the trailer when he collapsed. After they arrived home at their farm, they had to take apart the trailer so the emaciated horse could get out.

When they cleaned and examined the stallion, they found a tattoo on the inside of his upper lip. Not only had Aspen been a thoroughbred race horse—registered name Northern Stage—his pedigree indicated that he was the grandson of legendary Triple Crown winner Secretariat, and Northern Dancer, one of the greatest sires in racing history. He would require four days of intravenous fluids and months of physical rehabilitation to restore his health.

Rescuing horses like Aspen is a day's work for Van Wie, who has developed her passion for horses and the Adirondacks into a dual career as the full-time director of philanthropy at the Adirondack Nature Conservancy, and the cofounder and codirector (along with Mrozik) of Crane Mountain Valley Horse Rescue, Inc. The volunteer-based nonprofit is dedicated to giving abused, neglected, and slaughter-bound horses a second chance at life by providing shelter, physical and emotional rehabilitation, and adoption by qualified and approved caretakers.

Van Wie's day begins at 5 a.m., feeding and grooming horses at Crane Mountain's sprawling 43-acre farm in Westport, New York, a bucolic nook cradled by the peaks of the Adirondacks. Along with a dazzling view in every direction, the farm hosts dozens of horse residents—the majority of them rescues—who share the grounds with an assortment of other farm and domestic animals. While she's at work during the day, Mrozik manages the farm as a full-time



Van Wie appears in her 1982 *Gargoyle* profile with Gingo, accompanied by a quote from Scottish politician and writer Robert Cunningham-Graham: "God forbid that I should go to any heaven in which there are no horses."

volunteer, and they both go back to work after dinner, rarely retiring before 10 or 11 p.m.

"It's my exercise and my sanity," said Van Wie, whose dedication to the care and protection of horses began long before she came to Emma Willard.

Given a horse by her parents when she was three years old, she grew up on a farm in Center Brunswick, New York, learning to love and care for the Arabian palomino named Gingo. When she became a day student at Emma Willard—following her aunt Elinor Van Wie Moreton '38 and sister Susan Van Wie Kastan '73—she also arose at 5 a.m. each day to feed and care for Gingo before leaving for school. Sometimes, she would read homework assignments while riding him across the farm.

Although she didn't realize it at the time, she said, many of her experiences as an Emma Willard student prepared her for the roles she would later assume. In classes that she loved, like modern dance with instructor Pat Peterson, she learned

to express herself through motion. Today, she still does the exercises she learned in that class to keep herself limber so that congenital spina bifida and scoliosis will not interfere with her ability to work with horses. Even in her less favored classes, like chemistry with Robert Petersen, Van Wie says she was always encouraged in her efforts and never made to feel like she was failing.

"He had a way of making me feel like I was succeeding, even when I just wasn't getting it," she said. "That's something that Emma Willard gives you; the ability to try, and the recognition that you never fail, you only succeed. Making mistakes isn't failing, it's learning."

When she packed up and left home to begin a double major in French and environmental science at the University of Vermont, Gingo came along and was stabled at a UVM barn owned by a small horse club at the school. Van Wie's father had given her permission to take the horse with her to college, with the stipulation that caring for him would not affect her grades. During Van Wie's freshman year, Gingo was kicked by another horse and suffered several broken ribs and a punctured lung. She spent her first few months at college sleeping in his stall and nursing him back to health. Clutching a first-semester grade report littered with C's and D's, she returned home in tears.

"My father asked me if I had done the best I could do and I said that, under the circumstances, I had," she said. "He told me, 'I didn't ask you to get A's; I asked you to do your best. You took your commitment to your horse and to another life seriously, and that's what I expected.'"

Van Wie stayed at UVM and graduated with honors in 1986. During her time there, she and a friend revitalized the horse club, using their spare time to raise funds, recruit new members, give demonstrations, print literature, and equip the stables, while also making sure that the horses were properly cared for. By her senior year, UVM had 200 students competing on its equestrian team at venues throughout the Northeast.

After college, she took a job at a thoroughbred breeding farm, and it was there that she first saw the impact that the racing profession was having on horses. Several of the horses she worked with had injuries that she felt made it dangerous

"People sometimes look at a horse and assume that it can do anything. That's not always true."

Nancy Van Wie with Buck, a young horse she rescued from a slaughter auction. When she found him, Buck had the worst case of lice she'd ever seen on a horse; an infestation so severe it stunted his growth.



for them to race, but her concerns were rebuffed by her employer, who said, "You can't save them all."

"Horses are athletes just like humans are athletes," Van Wie said. "Their body compositions are different; some are better at running sprints, others can run marathons. Some can carry heavy weights, others can't. People sometimes look at a horse and assume that it can do anything; that it can run, it can pull, it can carry. That's not always true. If we can partner with them, they will do anything as long as it is within their own limitations. It's a matter of learning how to work with them and understand them in such a way that you bring out their best, tap into their potential, and help them have self-confidence, trust, and respect."

Frustrated by the racing industry, she moved to Boston and switched professional gears, working as a corporate consultant. Gingo was boarded at a nearby farm and Van Wie made daily trips to visit him and to work off fees and food costs by cleaning stalls.

In 1989, Van Wie lost the friend she'd had since she was a tot when Gingo developed terminal cancer and, at age 30, was humanely euthanized by a veterinarian.

"It was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. It was unbelievably difficult to let him go."

At the farm where Gingo had been boarded, Van Wie learned of an ornery horse with a reputation for consistently

returning from the trails riderless. She spent the next seven years working with Val, rehabilitating his severely cracked hooves (which took nearly a year to heal properly) but primarily offering emotional therapy for his erratic temperament.

Horses have a language of their own, Van Wie said, and they use body language to communicate with each other. By observing them in the field, she studied how they directed, disciplined, and rewarded each other, and she discovered that they responded to her when she used a similar language. She rejected conventional methods that dictated dominance and control to gain submission in training horses.

"All you'll get with that approach is injured," she said. "I weigh 115 pounds, they weigh about 1,500 pounds. I thought it would be smart to learn how to *ask* them to do something rather than to *tell* them how to do something. If you respect their space and respect what they feel comfortable with, they will do what you ask them to do. You don't need to tell them what to do, you just have to know how to ask."

As she worked to rehab Val, she began taking vacations in the Adirondacks to escape the stressful corporate grind, and enjoyed a peace in the quiet, remote mountains that she realized she needed to experience more than twice a year. So she quit her job, packed up the house, the dog, the cat, the rabbit, and Val, and moved to the Adirondacks—jobless and homeless.

She started a consulting business in small business set-up and completed an MBA program at SUNY Albany, while also waitressing to supplement her income. After donating Val to the Double H Hole in the Woods Ranch—a full-service camping facility in Lake Luzerne, New York, for children and families dealing with life-threatening illness—she found herself horseless for the first time since Gingo died, a condition that did not last long. In 1996 she accepted a job as a consultant, and then as full-time fundraiser, at the Silver Bay Association, a YMCA vacation and conference center on Lake George. While at Silver Bay, she was contacted by a local boarding facility that had a mare named Poesy, who was so belligerent few dared enter her stall. The horse had been through extensive reconstructive surgery to correct a congenital bacterial infection in one of her legs, Van Wie said. The pain had left her with a deeply ingrained fear and mistrust of people.

"Everything that humans did to her to try to save her life was painful, so she decided that humans were not something that she wanted to be around," she said. "She became very tactile defensive, very aggressive. You couldn't touch her, you couldn't walk her; she kicked, bit, reared, knocked people down. There was a lot of emotional rehab to be done with Poesy."

As she began working with Poesy, Van Wie met Eddie Mrozik, an award-winning architectural sheet-metal worker who was

"A lot of the horses we have are here because people frequently don't know what goes into properly caring for a horse."

restoring the copper roof on Silver Bay's inn. Mrozik was a lifelong horse lover who grew up in New York City and had worked with horses at Belmont and Aqueduct race tracks. Van Wie introduced Eddie to Poesy to help in her rehabilitation, and the pair spent their off hours comparing notes on her progress. Their association became both a romantic and professional one: together they bought a Warrensburg, New York, farm in 2002, in the same year that Van Wie joined the Adirondack Nature Conservancy. They were married in 2004, a year after launching Crane Mountain Valley Horse Rescue, which takes its name from a mountain next to the Warrensburg farm. They moved to their current site in Westport in November 2004, simultaneously reducing Van Wie's commute to the Nature Conservancy's chapter office in Keene Valley, New York, and doubling the size of their farm.

In three years of operation, Van Wie and Mrozik have rescued more than 50 horses, many with heart-wrenching stories of neglect and abuse at the hands of the people charged with their care. They keep a photo book of Crane Mountain's rescues, and Van Wie reverently thumbs through it, remembering each horse's story: Remington, purchased at a slaughter auction and suffering from a forehead fracture that may have been the result of a deliberate blow; Big Red, the grandson of Man of War who came to Crane Mountain wearing a halter that had to be cut off because it had been on his head so long his face had grown around it; Beau, who was hobbled by two bowed tendons that made him unsuitable for racing and required a year of physical rehabilitation.

Not all Crane Mountain rescues are thoroughbreds. Van Wie and Mrozik serve as local animal control officers and assist state police with animal cruelty investigations, sometimes taking in horses that have been confiscated by authorities because of neglect and abuse. They also

publish a newsletter, maintain a Web site, and keep in contact with breeders and ranchers in an effort to publicize their availability to the many areas of the horse industry—rodeos, dressage, equestrian competitions, trail operators, and more—who may have unwanted or injured horses and may be considering slaughter as an option. According to the Humane Society of the United States, nearly 100,000 horses are commercially slaughtered each year in the U.S. Although slaughter is illegal here, several foreign-owned slaughterhouses in Texas and Illinois process, ship, and sell horse meat for human consumption in Europe and Asia. In addition, thousands of live horses are transported across the border to Canada for slaughter, with the meat exported to serve specialty markets overseas.

"A lot of the horses we have are here because people frequently don't know what goes into properly caring for a horse," Van Wie said. "You don't just give them hay and water. They need dental care. They need hoof care. They need to be de-wormed. They need to see a vet regularly. Sometimes that level of care overwhelms people, or they just don't have the knowledge, or they just don't care."

New arrivals at Crane Mountain are immediately treated to a full veterinary exam with X-rays to assess their condition and determine how much medical care will be needed. Costs for care during the first three months average \$500 per month. With administrative costs at around 6 percent, the other 94 percent of the funding they raise through donations goes directly toward the care of the horses.

The farm and its equipment are owned entirely by Van Wie and Mrozik. Their extensive knowledge of horses, combined with Van Wie's business and fundraising acumen and Mrozik's artisanal and mechanical abilities, are key to keeping down expenses, as are the volunteers who help out at the farm.

Aside from giving horses a second chance at life, Crane Mountain's biggest mission is providing educational outreach, especially to children and adolescents, to help reduce the incidence of horse abuse in the future. Area schools frequently visit the farm, and Crane Mountain has been asked to design student programs that teach children how to communicate without resorting to abuse. They also have provided horse-care programs for youth groups, 4-H clubs, and community service programs; have sponsored job shadowing programs at an area high school; and have hosted high school and college students working to earn course credit toward their equine studies or veterinary school. All outreach programs are offered free of charge.

The landscape of Crane Mountain is strewn with stories of abuse, rescue, recovery, and renewal, and each day, Nancy Van Wie experiences a little of each.

In August 2004, Aspen—the pedigreed stallion whom she found near death amid hundreds of doomed cattle—had recovered his health and was able to undergo surgery to repair bone chips in his knee. Although he was, at that point, "fat and happy" again, Van Wie said, he succumbed to the anesthesia and died, probably as a result of the malnourishment and mistreatment he had suffered early in his life.

The loss was devastating for Crane Mountain, but Aspen's legacy would not be entirely tragic. Before his surgery, Nancy and Eddie had mated him with Poesy, the mare whose once cantankerous behavior had brought together the proprietors of Crane Mountain. Today, a strapping young colt nicknamed Two Socks (full name Northern Pose of Aspens) is the pride of the farm.

"The two biggest passions of my life have been horses and the Adirondacks," Van Wie says while cuddling with the playful Two Socks. "To be able to be here, working in those two positions to save both, is right where I want to be. You have to go into it recognizing that you're not going to touch every life. But if you can touch just one..."

To learn more about Crane Mountain Valley Horse Rescue, visit their Web site at www.cmvhr.org. ■