

Woodstock sanctuary welcomes hard luck horses

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By Nicole Carter Advertiser Democrat

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WOODSTOCK — There are three types of horses that require rescue, according to Sarah Page.

The first are owner surrenders. Due to family loss, changes in personal or economic circumstances, the animal needs to be removed and go to a new home.

The second type is the horse that has already been sold or sent to a new home but ends up shipped to a feedlot or auction lot.

And the third type is the horse that has been seized, usually from circumstances of neglect or abuse, and is in poor health, or worse.

Any horse will find a welcoming haven at the Whole Horse Experience & Educational Equine Sanctuary, the rescue that Page and her partner, Gary Clegg, started five years ago. Twenty-three horses call the sanctuary home; close to half of them are long-term to permanent residents.

“We take in what could be termed problem kids, the ones that find themselves unwanted,” Page said. “Everyone loves the idea of rehabbing and adopting, but not everyone can take on projects that are economically challenging.”

Some of the horses have chronic health issues that require time and money. Others have challenging personalities. Still others are working breeds like drafts or thoroughbreds that tend to be less popular among horse hobbyists.

“We took in a retired carriage horse from New York after he retired in 2014,” Page said. “He has bladder issues, benign tumors that require \$300 a month in medications. Beyond that, I regularly tend to his legs so that he doesn’t get infections from urine scald, and then he needs additional procedures every six months or so to remove sediment from his bladder.”

Then there is Smoky, a gelding who reportedly couldn’t be handled.



Three of the horses that call Whole Horse Experience & Educational Equine Sanctuary in Woodstock home. *Advertiser Democrat photo by Nicole Carter*

"His owner had died and her husband decided to surrender him," Page explained. "Yes, he was temperamental, he had lost his person."

But Page and Clegg accepted Smoky and he has come a long way. They worked with him on his behavior issues and put him in an environment where his own peers keep him in check.

"He can be a bit of a bully with other horses. So he lives with the larger draft horses, they put him in his place when he needs it," she said.

Page grew up in Bethel and her love of horses led her to work in various stable capacities around New England. When she returned to Maine in 2012 the intent was to start a riding stable of her own, not a rescue and sanctuary.

"In 2014 we began looking for horses to acquire for lessons and trail riding," Page said. "And what we found were animals at auctions, bound for meat markets. They were being purchased as short sales and then flipped."

Over 100,000 U.S. horses end up in markets for human consumption in Canada and Mexico. Europe, too, is a primary export market. And according to Page, Japan is perhaps the most notorious buyer of exported auction horses.

"In Japan, fresh horse meat is a delicacy. So several horses are jammed into wooden crates, and shipped live across the Pacific. They can go up to 36 hours without light, food or water."

The realization made the pair change their plans. Rather than purchasing a few animals to promote recreation to horse lovers, Page and Clegg resolved to rescue horses for either shorter-term respite before being adopted to new homes, or permanent sanctuary with them.

"We take in local surrenders," Page said. "Last fall I think we had 12 calls from locals. So far this fall, I've had at least 10. But we've hauled horses at auction in from as far away as Pennsylvania, New Jersey. And they are in all states of health."

Page laments that the need for equine rescue far outnumbers active rescuers. She has accepted horses that other rescues have denied because they would be hard to rehab or adopt out, and taken horses off struggling rescues' hands that arrived in compromised



Sarah Page feeds Smoky, a horse that no one wanted after his owner died. He happily resides at Whole Horse Experience & Educational Equine Sanctuary in Woodstock. *Advertiser Democrat photo by Nicole Carter*

conditions. On the other end of the spectrum, there are marketing-savvy rescue organizations that succeed in fundraising but have such narrow selection practices that many horses are left on the outside looking in.

"I've heard of one rescue talking about rehabbing and adopting out 11 horses in a year," Page said. "Yet it's a multi-million dollar facility with four dozen stalls. All those resources and only 11 horses?"

The Whole Horse Experience & Educational Equine Sanctuary sits on 150 acres, with about 30 of that being pastureland. Page had her eye on the property with its circa 1786 farmhouse for a few years before she and Clegg were able to buy it.

"For six years it just sat vacant. We inquired but it wasn't available," Page said.

When the property was finally listed in 2017 their real estate agent let them know and they immediately made an offer. But it had been vacant so long that it wasn't habitable.

"The plumbing was gone, thieves stripped all the copper," Page said. "The heating system had frozen and cracked. All the lines to the septic system were destroyed. The electrical, it was all 110 power. And it had been a hoarder's house. It was full, even the dishwasher still had dirty dishes in it."

It took the pair a year to make the house livable. Clegg, a building contractor, had to completely renovate it. But the land was enough to at least give the horses they'd already started rescuing an immediate place to call home. As time and funds permit, pastures continue to expand across the open fields.

By day Clegg and Page work the farm and care for their charges. A visit to the sanctuary's Facebook page shows before and after images of how rescued horses' quality of life improves. Many arrive thin and needy. Some require immediate veterinary care while others must receive long-term medical treatments. Page tells each horse's individual story on her [Facebook/WholeHorseSanctuary/](https://www.facebook.com/WholeHorseSanctuary/) page.



Baloo, left, and Max are adoptable riding horses rescued from a New Jersey auction. *Advertiser Democrat*
photo by Nicole Carter

Typically, the urgent needs such as veterinary care supersede the important one of fundraising. The cost for round-bale hay alone runs more than \$20,000 a year. The vet bills never cease.

Page said she has an anonymous donor who pledged to match up to \$1,000 during this month. She has collected about a third of that amount to get the match.

Page and Clegg have two volunteers who come one day a week. They have had as many as five extra sets of hands to help, but the work can be hard. The couple goes it alone most days.

Clegg also works as a property manager for a condominium group and Page works at a pub in Bethel four or five nights a week.

Page has no specific veterinarian to rely on day-to-day. Her favorite vet is the one most readily available and sometimes that means an ailing horse has to be loaded up and hauled up to two hours to get care. If something as serious as surgery is needed the expense is also a factor.

"Some procedures, we go to a clinic in Rochester, New Hampshire," Page said. "They might charge \$300 for something that would cost \$800 locally."

The most recent vet emergency involved Maisie, a 17.2-hand retired thoroughbred. He smacked his head one night and required stitches. The next day he was recovering nicely, sporting a series of purple butterfly bandages on his forehead.

“Now Maisie would make someone a great horse,” Page said, noting that his size and breed reputation are strikes against him. “He had a successful career, winning about \$360,000 in prize money. He is a Storm Cat grandson. But it’s hard to find a good home for a thoroughbred.”

After being retired, Maisie ended up as a summer camp lesson horse and was in danger of going to auction. One of the directors at the camp stepped in and paid off his lease. So for now and maybe forever, Maisie can count himself as one of the lucky horses who calls Whole Horse Experience & Educational Equine Sanctuary home.



Maisie, retired from a successful racing career, has found a caring home at Whole Horse Experience & Educational Equine Sanctuary in Woodstock. *Advertiser Democrat photo by Nicole Carter*

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