

Liberty Sanctuary Combines Rescue & Advocacy

*Nonprofit to host a free community event at SAFN HAUS gallery
by Jonahan Herrera*



Liberty Sanctuary's primary trainer, Searra Brandt, rides Porter, mustang rescued from a Colorado kill pen, during a training session at the ranch in Heber. Credit: Jonathan Herrera/Park Record

“When you see even the smallest progress from them, you just feel like you’re giving them their lives back,” said Debra West, watching a mustang circle the paddock at Liberty Sanctuary in Heber City.

West, founder of the equine rescue nonprofit and advocacy group, has been involved in the horse community for more than 20 years. She arrived in Utah in 2002, first in Park City and then moving to Heber in 2010. When she purchased the 80-acre property in 2015 and rescued her first horse — a paint horse named Shiloh from Mona — she didn’t yet know it would become the foundation of something much larger.

The sanctuary today is home to 26 horse rescues, including seven mustangs from the Bureau of Land Management, seven Indian reservation horses and 12 domestic horses, along with three sheep and four donkeys — two burros from the BLM and two mini donkeys. The numbers shift as horses are adopted out, but West said **Liberty is home to more wild horses than any sanctuary in Utah.**

Liberty Sanctuary is home to horses, sheep, donkeys, burros and a rambunctious herd of dogs.

*PC: Jonathan Herrera,
Park Record.*



From the beginning, West said the goal was not only to rescue horses, but to **educate the public and legislators about what is actually happening nationwide: that healthy, young American horses are needlessly sent to slaughter.**

“The American horse stands for freedom. Because of the horse, settlers were able to explore the country and head west,” she said. **“It’s unfathomable how this gracious animal, which has enabled the country’s progress, has fallen victim to greed, severe abuse and too often an unjust and cruel demise.”**

West said one of the most **persistent misconceptions about horses in the slaughter pipeline is that they are untrainable.** Once a horse is taken from the wild or removed from a stable situation, learning how to live in the human world becomes essential to its survival. **That training, she added, happens entirely on the horse's timetable.**

“We don’t break horses,” she said. **“We partner with them.”** Liberty Sanctuary’s approach to rehabilitation is slow and deliberate, **rooted in patience, consistency and communication,** said West. Horses are allowed months — sometimes a year or more — simply to decompress before formal training begins.

That’s because **a horse that is stuck in fear cannot truly learn,** West explained. It may comply, but compliance without trust does not lead to safety, partnership or long-term success.



It's a philosophy reflected in the sanctuary's training methods, which draw from **natural and science-based horsemanship**. The sanctuary incorporates the Liberty Training Method developed by Carolyn Resnick, which emphasizes **shared territory, herd dynamics and choice**. In practice, this method removes many of the physical tools common in traditional training. There are no ropes, no bits and no bridles. Early sessions may involve a human sitting quietly with a horse, sharing space and hay, without asking anything at all.



*Scout &
Asher,
PC: Jonathan
Herrera, Park
Record*

The physical environment is designed to support that approach. Rather than round pens, which can make horses feel trapped, Liberty uses open paddocks with corners where horses can step away, rest or observe. West said the ability to disengage is critical for traumatized animals, many of whom arrive from kill pens, auctions or reservation roundups with heightened fight-or-flight responses.

Intentional herd dynamics play an equally important role. More experienced ranch horses are mixed with newer rescues so incoming horses have models of calm, educated behavior. Younger horses without strong role models are paired carefully, and herds are adjusted as needed to prevent unhealthy attachments. **West said horses learn from one another just as much as they learn from people.**

Much of that day-to-day work is led by Liberty Sanctuary's primary trainer, **Searra Brandt**. Raised in a family of horse lovers in the Heber Valley, Brandt spent 10 years in 4-H, and four years on her high school rodeo team, competing in barrel racing, team roping and breakaway events.



*Searra Brandt & adoptable Mustang, Porter
PC: Jonathan Herrera, Park Record*

She has been training horses for about a decade and is an equine science major at the University of Utah. She is also a farrier.

Brandt's style is **quiet and observant, shaped by an understanding that every horse has a different history.** During a recent training session, she worked with **Porter**, a 2017 mustang rescued from a Colorado kill pen.

While some adopters prefer to start with horses at the earliest stages of training, Porter arrived with enough foundation that Brandt could gradually peel back layers of fear and build on his existing knowledge. She said progress varies widely — some horses come around in months, others take longer, and some surprise trainers entirely in a day's worth of training once they feel safe.



*Cody & Navajo Eating From Tarter Elevated Hay Baskets
PC: Jonathan Herrera, Park Record*

Brandt said working with mustangs often requires a different mental framework than working with domestic horses bred for saddle training. Mustangs are born into survival-driven herd dynamics, while domestic horses may have experienced repeated negative interactions with humans. In both cases, she said, training begins with reading the horse's emotional state rather than imposing expectations. Trust, once established, becomes the foundation for everything that follows.



*Debra West, Founder & Exec. Director, Liberty Sanctuary
PC: Jonathan Herrera, Park Record*

The nonprofit's adoption philosophy mirrors its training approach. West said the sanctuary keeps horses at fair market value, believing that pricing is one way to protect horses from being flipped and re-entering the slaughter pipeline. **Prospective homes are carefully vetted**, and Liberty will always take a horse back if an adoption does not work. In some cases, West said, staff have turned around mid-delivery if conditions were not what had been promised. **“What’s in the best interest of the horse comes first,”** she said.

Beyond rescue and training, Liberty's mission extends into advocacy and solutions. West said the sanctuary was designed from the outset to support passage of the Save America's Forgotten Equines Act, or the SAFE Act, which would prohibit the export of American equines for slaughter. Liberty launched SAFEACT.org in 2024, an advocacy platform that has generated more than 10,000 letters to legislators from all 50 states.

The sanctuary also works directly with national organizations and campaigns, including Animal Wellness Action and the Wild Beauty Foundation's Lost Horses campaign, to coordinate education and lobbying efforts.



Last November, Liberty Sanctuary hosted U.S. Rep. Mike Kennedy, R, and his team for a first-hand look at the horses, the training process and the realities of the dangers American horses face. West said collaboration, not competition, is essential, both among sanctuaries and with policymakers.

Liberty hopes to expand capacity and community involvement. Feed costs alone range from \$60,000 to \$80,000 annually, and West said **the sanctuary seeks grazing land, particularly from landowners who are land-banking underused pasture.** Access to 20 or more acres, she said, would significantly reduce costs while improving herd health and management.

As momentum builds around the SAFE Act, Liberty is promoting an initiative called **Each Horse, Every Barn**, which encourages barns across the country to **commit to adopting at least one rescue horse.**

West said the work is demanding and often slow, but rewarding, especially when a horse begins to show signs of trust and progress. For those not ready or able to take on a horse, volunteer opportunities are available at the sanctuary.

For others looking to show support, Liberty Sanctuary will also host a **free community event on Friday, Feb. 20, from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at SAFN HAUS gallery in Heber City**, featuring fine art photography by Andrea Bear Fine Art Photography, custom hat making by Feather Hat Bar, and wine from Chester Wines, a Russian River Vineyards label that supports animal rescues. More information and RSVP details are available at givebutter.com/SAFNHAUS.

As Liberty continues to grow, West said community awareness and involvement remain essential to the sanctuary's mission. For more information: libertysanctuary.org.
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