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## PROUD SPIRIT HORSE SANCTUARY IS DEDICATED TO CARING FOR HORSES’ EMOTIONAL NEEDS

BY DUTCH HENRY



**S**anctuary. Webster’s dictionary defines sanctuary as “a safe place. A place of refuge and protection.” Proud Spirit Horse Sanctuary in Lincolnton, Georgia is exactly that. Currently over 50 horses, who have been rescued from all manner of abuse, neglect and trauma, can live out their lives, running free under the watchful eyes of Melanie Sue Bowles and her husband Jim. Never again to worry about hunger or abandonment, they romp together as a family through pastures, streams and woods. Melanie expects nothing of them, except that they enjoy the peace and happiness here. Being one of the few true horse sanctuaries in the country no horse will ever be adopted out. “They’ve given enough.” Melanie will tell you.

Jim and Melanie made their livings as professional firefighters in Florida and lived in town. One day about 25 years ago, for no particular reason, they packed up and moved to the country, purchasing a lovely little place of about five acres. Sure seemed like a lot of space. They noticed many of their neighbors had horses and they became intrigued. Neither had ever been around horses.

Melanie had not grown up horse crazy, and does not remember ever even thinking about horses before moving out of town. Firefighting is hard work and leaves a body tired at the end of the day, but watching their new friends and neighbors busy with their horses peaked Melanie's interest. She asked Jim if she might get a horse. After all, she explained, they had all that space now.

After a brief search she found Cody, an off-the-track Thoroughbred at a summer horse camp. She'd never ridden a horse, but Cody seemed just right and she rode her there before bringing her home, and together they did fine. Thinking back now she understands Cody was tired, hungry and sore like all the horses at the camp had been. Which explains why after she'd been living with Jim and Melanie a bit, with time to relax and plenty to eat, she got quite a bit more energized. All their friends told them she was not a safe horse and she should not ride Cody. In fact, they strongly advised her to sell Cody. But by then Cody had communicated to Melanie that she wasn't a bad horse. She was just a horse trying to sort things out. She'd been passed around, ridden hard and fed little. Melanie would not sell her and take the risk she'd be mistreated and starved again. She looked in Cody's eye and promised she could roam the wide expanse of their five acres and just be a horse, while she set out to find a horse she could ride. After all, they had plenty of land, room for at least another horse.

## OPENING THE DOOR

Cody had opened the door to the first of many surprises for Melanie and Jim about horses, their care, needs and desires. And treatment. But it was Strut, or the search



Jim and Melanie Bowles, founders of Proud Spirit Horse Sanctuary

that led to finding Strut, an older, sweet, well grounded and polite Quarter Horse, that opened more doors into that realm of horses' lives. They saw many very well cared for, and well-trained horses. Some ordinary and some magnificent horses, barns, farms and horse owners. But what Melanie also saw, and first began to grasp, was a seemingly universal disregard for the emotional well being of the horse. Cody had taught her to see things from the horse's point of view, and while Melanie didn't quite understand it yet, she was beginning to form the paradigm in her heart that would shape her own future.

Strut did prove to be a wonderful horse to ride. Melanie called him her baby sitter. But as the weeks and months wore on and friends instructed her in the ways and needs of different tack, training and other perceived normal horsekeeping necessities, that feeling of missing the horse's point of view persisted. Melanie never really developed a love for riding, but the love of horses had crept into her heart.

About that time a horse named Dusty found them. Melanie had heard about a two-year-old Thoroughbred who had been abandoned in a lot and had starved down to a condition that left him barely able to walk. They brought Dusty home and began his recovery. It was Dusty's quiet, pleading eyes that told Melanie what they must do. She and Jim would open their hearts and their home to horses in need and offer them lifelong sanctuary. Jim, who was in total agreement, told Melanie, "I think we need more land."

They moved to a 50-acre farm soon after that, and before long there were over 20 horses enjoying peace and just living their lives as free, safe horses. All of them having come from

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continued next page

“Horses come to Proud Spirit to stay. None are ever offered for adoption. Melanie and Jim lead by example, opening their home, their hearts and their spirits to horses who need sanctuary. Nothing is expected of the horse except that they live happily, just being a horse. It is their hope that their example, books and documentary will help others to realize that horses have an emotional side that needs as much care and nurturing as the physical side.”

Jim and Melanie make a practice of saving horses other rescues turn down, and since they'll never adopt them out, they don't need to be able to be ridden. "Our horses will never see a bit, saddle or any tack again. They've given enough." Melanie says.



one form or another of neglect or abuse. Melanie believes it's quite arrogant for humans to think they are the only species that deserve emotional well being. She and Jim believe and promote that it is just as important to place as much emphasis on the horses' emotional well being as we do on their physical needs. That thought became the cornerstone of Proud Spirit Horse Sanctuary's philosophy.

They stayed in Florida on that delightful little farm until retiring from the fire department. Melanie had begun to promote the idea of considering the horse's emotional well being and found more horses who needed sanctuary, or intervention. With their herd increasing they knew they needed more land and nine years ago, took a giant leap, and took 40 horses to West Arkansas to resettle on 300 acres. Marching to the beat of their own drum, and following the heart of the horse, Melanie believes horses do not need a job, that they have as much right as any human to simply

be a horse, live free and enjoy their life. She admits that she and Jim have taken criticism for that belief, even being told they are wasting good horses. "I have a hard time trying to understand why some people think like that," Melanie said.

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## FROM A BOOK TO A DOCUMENTARY

For her own sake, Melanie began to write down the stories of some of the horses they'd rescued. As the herd grew to nearly 100, her stack of stories grew too. At the urging of a friend, she compiled some of those often heart-wrenching stories into a book. Not really

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sure anyone would publish her work, but excited by the prospect these stories might compel others to see things from the horse's perspective, Melanie sought a publisher. Her first book, "The Horses of Proud Spirit," was published in 2003. Not long after its release, that book caught the eye of then PBS producer Colleen Hamilton, who knew the story of the sanctuary. She thought the horses there, and Melanie's drive to help them would make a wonderful and uplifting documentary. She was right. Her documentary was shown nationally in 2005 and even earned an Emmy. Melanie's dream to encourage people to consider the emotional well being of horses had received a giant boost.

Melanie has since published two more books, "Hoof Prints" and "The Dogs of Proud Spirit." Over the years the sanctuary has also welcomed a number of unwanted dogs as well. The proceeds from all her books help to support the sanctuary.

Just about a year ago Jim and Melanie moved to a smaller but lovely farm of 180 acres in Georgia. The current herd is over 50 free spirits strong and includes horses from more than a dozen states, and even several Mustangs from BLM roundups.

A beautiful Mustang named Journey, from the BLM Herd Management Area in Twin Peaks, California is among the family at Proud Spirit. Journey had been caught in the final roundup there, which removed every last wild horse from an area that had originally been designated for the wild horses. He had been adopted and moved to Florida. Not able to take the climate change, Journey never really adjusted, and like too many BLM mustangs he had been passed around and around, never finding peace or love. "Water For Elephants" author Sara Gruen heard of poor Journey's situation and paid for, and arranged his transportation to Proud Spirit.

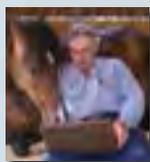
Two other Proud Spirit family members are a pair of retired park service horses from Guadalupe National Park in New Mexico, who after

20 years of service were about to be euthanized. Even their riders were unable to save them from the bureaucracy that engulfed them. When Melanie heard of their situation, she sprang into action and after much discussion brought them to the sanctuary where they lived out their lives in peace and comfort.

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Thank you Cody for first lighting that spark of knowledge in Melanie all those years ago. To learn more and to purchase their books, visit [www.horsesofproudsprite.org](http://www.horsesofproudsprite.org)



Dutch Henry is a novelist and writer who writes about "People & Horses Helping Horses & People" and resides in Virginia with his wife of 36 years, Robin; along with one horse, dogs, cats and chickens. Dutch also does free "Therapy For Therapy Horse Clinics" at therapeutic riding centers across the country to help horses maintain proper posture, free-and-easy movement and body carriage. You can reach Dutch at [dutchhenry@hughes.net](mailto:dutchhenry@hughes.net) He would love to hear from you. Join his blog at, <http://dutchhenry.blogspot.com> His novel "We'll Have the Summer," is available on Amazon and Dutch's website [www.dutchhenryauthor.com](http://www.dutchhenryauthor.com)

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