

# Diamonds OUT OF THE ROUGH

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Hundreds of unwanted, abused and neglected horses have found a new lease on life thanks to one landmark equine rehabilitation and adoption facility.

**T**HE SALE VETERINARIAN CALLED THE DUN GELDING “THE WALKING DEAD,” but he wasn’t smiling. He couldn’t believe the starving horse could walk—and that someone consigned him to a livestock sale.

A phone call to the Colorado Department of Agriculture Animal Health Division set in motion an animal cruelty investigation with the department’s Bureau of Animal Protection. The veterinarian gave the gelding a Henneke equine body condition score of 1, which equates to extremely emaciated. The seven horses consigned with him were not much better.

Hours later, Garret Leonard watched the now-impounded group of horses unload at the Dumb Friends League Harmony Equine Center in the Front Range foothills south of Franktown, Colorado. He’d seen hundreds of horses arrive in similar shape in his five years as program director of Harmony, Colorado’s only equine impound and sheltering facility.

The Dumb Friends League—founded in Denver in 1910 and taking its name from the historic meaning of “dumb” as unable to speak for oneself—is one of the nation’s most successful private, non-profit companion animal sheltering and adoption organizations. In 2012 it opened Harmony Equine Center, its first equine facility, to specifically help rehabilitate and rehome abused and neglected horses seized by or relinquished to state law enforcement agencies in animal cruelty cases.

Since then, Harmony’s success in rehabilitating and adopting out hundreds of horses has won national attention, especially for its focus on giving horses in its care quality training. It also has established its own feeding protocol for starving horses backed by research-worthy numbers and documentation that has gained the attention of the American Association of Equine Practitioners. Its services, from helping with warrants or transportation to medical care and training, are completely funded by donors.

As Leonard watched the dun gelding stumble through the intake process—photos, tagging, weighing, veterinary exam and feeding—he wasn’t worried. Despite the January cold and a winter coat that only outlined the horse’s prominent ribs and hips, he knew the gelding would be fine. They named him Dash.

“When we first started, you just wanted to get mad at the owners. Why would somebody do this, let a horse suffer?” Leonard says. “Now, I look at it as an opportunity to save something. I know which ones are going to make it. It’s going to take time, but I know our process is good. We’ll get these horses to a home.” >>



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** The Dumb Friends League Harmony Equine Center trainers come from a variety of backgrounds. Ben Grogan (center) worked for horseman Chris Cox prior to joining Harmony's staff. ● Program Director Garret Leonard estimates that he has helped start more than 800 horses. He has had the help of his gelding, Doc, with two-thirds of them. ● The DFL Harmony Equine Center covers 168 acres with three heated barns and 26 pastures and turnouts.

## THE PATH TO ADOPTION

The only thing horses at Harmony have in common is the need for a new owner.

They arrive in all sizes, sexes, breeds and ages, with problems ranging from lice to cancer, and can be well trained or have dangerous behavior problems.

"We see an increase in intake in winter," Leonard says. "That's when they're expensive to feed; horses don't starve if there's any amount of pasture."

Impounded horses are housed at the isolation barn and its pens until cleared by a veterinarian. For unhandled or aggressive horses, the barn has a state-of-the-art chute system with a certified scale and a platform that allows

staff to work above a horse rather than beside it—all necessary, especially if a feral horse has a health issue needing treatment. There is also a hydraulic squeeze chute designed for horses; Leonard says he considers it invaluable.

Most horses come in singly or as a pair, but the largest intake was 64. One case of 58 turned into 68 because 10 mares were in foal.

"We had to run that entire herd [of 58] through [the squeeze chute]," he recalls. "Someone dumped a group of horses on somebody's land and they'd been multiplying for years. The local sheriff's office finally rounded them up and brought them here."

At intake, Leonard explains, the first goal is to get the horses eating and drinking.

"Their intake weight is the lightest they should ever be," he says. "We'll address long-term health issues, too, like hoof problems. Every horse gets a vet exam, even if it was examined at seizure. When it comes to court, you're better off with two opinions."

For malnourished and starving horses, the feeding program is simple: Start slowly with quality grass hay (8–10 percent protein content) fed free choice, and clean water. Horses are weighed once a week to monitor their progress. The biggest risk is colic as the horse's digestive system



"There's nothing wrong with this horse," says Winston of 14-year-old Chief, who came to Harmony through an animal cruelty case. "He just got a raw deal."

readjusts to feeding; however, among almost 1,200 equines received in five years Harmony has had just two cases of colic.

The facility is spread across 168 acres, with three barns and 26 pastures and turnouts. In addition to the isolation/intake barn, the main barn has 25 stalls with runs, as well as a large indoor arena, round pen and educational classrooms. The smaller training barn has 20 stalls and an indoor arena. A total of 80 regular volunteers each donate three hours a week to help with barn work.

Horses are primarily housed outside in paddocks or pens. Stalls are typically used for horses that remain hard to catch or those so thin they need a warm barn. To

control and prevent the spread of infectious diseases, all three barns are at least 150 feet apart. The isolation barn and its chutes are power-washed and disinfected after every intake and use.

Sometimes lack of handling or behavior problems don't show up until after a horse has gained weight and is feeling better.

"They're not the same horse at [body condition score] 1 as they are at 5," Leonard says. "Just because they are quiet and easygoing when they get here doesn't mean that's what they are when we start training."

Training begins once a court case is settled and seized horses are signed over to HEC. It's the linchpin to getting a horse adopted.

"The only way that a facility like this is going to be successful is through training," Leonard says, pointing out that Harmony has five full-time trainers. "We invest a lot of resources into training for that reason. A well-trained horse always has a place."

### THE HARMONY WAY

Every day is a colt-starting day, in some fashion, for a Harmony trainer, but the average age range of "colts" is 8 to 14. Unexpected baggage tends to crop up, from bucking to running backward or refusing to move at all. Unhandled horses require the least guesswork. Some horses, like the dun gelding Dash, turn out to be dead broke.

"We assume horses don't know anything," Leonard says. "Whatever people tell us about them, we throw it out."

Once horses show they are halter-broke, they head to the large indoor arena in the main barn. Trainers work horses in the arena at the same time, on everything from handling feet and grooming to saddling, longeing, flagging and riding. The horses get used to the activity of other horses and riders. There is very little round-pen work, although there is one in the arena if needed.

"[Legendary horseman] Ray Hunt was a big fan of getting horses' feet to move, and we use those principles here," Leonard says.

Typically, a trainer is assigned a horse for about 30 days and then the horse goes to another trainer to make sure the horses experience different riders. The trainers often work as a team to solve problems.

For continuing trainer education, Harmony occasionally brings in outside professional trainers "to add tools to our toolbox," Leonard says. They have included reined cow horse trainer Jason Patrick of Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and reiner Lance Shockley of Brighton, Colorado. The team also gives "Training the Harmony Way" demonstrations at their annual open house and events like the Rocky Mountain Horse Expo.

"The fatigue physically is not what can be too hard for these trainers," Leonard says, "but the fatigue mentally is where we see it get tough. It's hard work and every day."

Originally from Aurora, Colorado, and a horseman for 25 years, Leonard brings experience in non-profit work and equine facility management to Harmony, in addition to a background starting horses and competing as a roper.



**Name:** Dash, 25- to 30-year-old gelding / **Weight at Intake:** 711 lbs. / **Weight at 90 days:** 1,044 lbs. / **Of note:** Toothless, very broke / **Status:** Official Ambassador



**Name:** Pumpkin, 16-year-old mare / **Weight at Intake:** 504 lbs. / **Weight at 90 days:** 800 lbs. / **Of note:** Too weak to pick up hind feet at intake / **Status:** Adopted



**Name:** Hermione, 12-year-old mare, in foal / **Weight at Intake:** 884 lbs. / **Weight at 90 days:** 1,140 lbs. / **Of note:** Foaled 52 days after intake / **Status:** Adopted, both mare and filly

"You always wonder what a horse's story is; where did it come from?" Leonard says. "When they start training, these horses tell us their story. A horse doesn't lie. They tell us exactly what people have done with them, good or bad."

Take Chief, for example. The 14-year-old sorrel gelding was one of the group that arrived in January with Dash. Almost 100 days later, Chief had indicated that he'd been saddled but wouldn't do much more than sulk up at whatever was asked of him. He was made ready for a first ride at Harmony.

"I think somebody faked some rides on him," says Harmony Head Trainer Brent Winston. "Somebody wasn't very nice to him and he just learned to check out. He's not mean or aggressive; he'll just ignore you and go be someplace else in his mind."

Horseback, Leonard flagged the saddled gelding around the arena, gaining control of the horse's feet, getting him to move away from the pressure of the flag and return to the saddle horse when the pressure was off. When Chief began moving freely and paying attention, Winston mounted up and rode as Leonard repeated the experience, but with someone in the saddle. The gelding relaxed and his transitions from trot to canter became soft and fluid. Winston was pleased when he stepped off.

"I love helping horses that a lot of people don't want to help," he says.

Winston, originally from Peyton, Colorado, has made his living training and starting horses. His experience includes an internship with Ray Hunt.

"Initially I took this job because I needed one," he says. "But it's so much bigger than me, and what we get to do is so cool—helping horses that otherwise wouldn't get it. The journey they've made—they had to fight to survive. I love what I do."

He pauses and scratches the forehead of a wide-eyed and thinking Chief.

"With the older horses, sometimes you need to break through the crust," Winston says. "There's nothing wrong with this horse; he just got a raw deal."

## THE RIGHT OWNER

"We are not a sanctuary; we are not a rescue. We are an adoption facility," says Bob Rohde, president and CEO of the

Dumb Friends League, who has been with the organization since 1973. "We want to move horses to the appropriate owners to end suffering. Period."

In setting up Harmony, Rohde put together a task force of animal welfare and horse industry professionals from across the state, including equine veterinarians, horse trainers and representatives from organizations such as the Colorado Unwanted Horse Alliance, Certified Horsemanship Association and the state brand board.

"We identified early on the need for trainers," Rohde says. "If we had folks in here training, we could move horses along."

Solid training increases the horses' appeal to potential owners. By the end of 2015, Harmony had successfully adopted or transferred to partner organizations an average of 100 horses a year (according to DFL published annual reports, 2013–2015). Their success caught the attention of The Right Horse Initiative, which is backed by the WaterShed Animal Fund and seeks to increase horse adoptions in the United States.

"[They] asked us what it would take to double the program," Leonard says. "Well, we get whatever law enforcement brings us, and we don't want to create new court cases! So we sat down and worked out a plan to work with rescues. Rescues are

full, and most don't have a system to move horses."

A 2009 survey conducted by the Unwanted Horse Coalition reported that a majority of equine rescue and adoption facilities are either at or near capacity, and strapped for funding and staff. In opening its training and adoption services to rescues, Harmony could help more horses become better adoption candidates.

In 2016, a \$442,500 grant from the WaterShed Animal Fund enabled Harmony to do that. Hiring more trainers, the facility has more than doubled the number of horses it has helped annually. Most of the new horses have come from participating equine rescues in Colorado, although some have come from other states, such as Kentucky, Nebraska, New Mexico and Texas.

"Our average length of stay for the horses that come to us from rescue facilities is 90 days," Leonard says. "For horses that come from law enforcement cases, it's 162 days, because the first 90 days is just getting them healthy and fit enough to start them into the training program."

Harmony can house up to 200 adoptable equines at a time. When they get down to 70, Leonard gets on the phone with partners in The Right Horse Initiative to find more. More available options mean more potential adoptions.

## THE DUMB FRIENDS LEAGUE

**FOUNDED IN 1910** In Denver, Colorado, the Dumb Friends League has become one of the most successful companion animal adoption organizations in the United States. In fiscal year 2016 alone, the DFL aided 19,413 pets and 284 equines. Its name comes from the historic meaning of "dumb," referring to someone unable to speak and needing someone to speak for them.

The DFL focuses on rehabilitation, care and training to find animals new homes. With outreach efforts that include owner educational opportunities and low-cost spay and neuter clinics, it relies on partnerships with many state animal welfare and veterinary organizations to fulfill its mission, and a vast number of volunteers. Its primary aim is to end pet homelessness and animal suffering.

The Colorado Humane Society & SPCA is also operated by the DFL. It assists state agencies with inspecting and handling the logistics of companion animal abuse and neglect cases. It is a Colorado-based non-profit organization not affiliated with any national advocacy group or government agency.

The DFL opened Harmony Equine Center in spring 2012 to assist state law enforcement officials, especially rural sheriffs' offices, in handling equines seized and impounded in animal cruelty cases. Beginning in 2016, through support from The Right Horse Initiative, Harmony opened its training and adoption services to horses from participating equine rescues.

In five years, Harmony has successfully transitioned more than 850 horses to new homes or placement partners. For more information, go to [ddfl.org](http://ddfl.org).

Potential adopters fill out an application and provide references, and Harmony pulls a selection of horses for them to review. Adopters meet horses with their trainers, and the trainers ride the horses before adopters do. Once they decide on a potential match, adopters are required to have three lessons at Harmony with the horse and its trainer. Harmony performs site inspections of a horse's new home.

"At any point in the process, anyone can stop the adoption, either the adopter or the trainer," Leonard says. "Through the lesson process, we've had people discover that a horse is either too much or not enough, and we can help them find another."

If a horse is being ridden, the adoption fee is \$500. Leonard estimates that Harmony has about \$3,300 in each horse, adding in medical care, feeding, training and facility costs. But the cost isn't the most important factor.

"We just want to find the right horse for the right owner," he says.

### THE HARD DECISIONS

From the beginning, Rohde says, the Dumb Friends League knew that Harmony must have clear guidelines for making humane euthanasia decisions.

"We are very practical," Rohde says. "We faced a lot of skepticism from the horse industry people involved, that because DFL worked with companion animals we didn't know what we were doing with horses.

"But there are more similarities between dogs and cats and horses when

it comes to cruelty and neglect than one would think. We know how to handle large numbers of animals. And when it comes to making decisions for euthanasia, horses are no different. Every euthanasia decision is a difficult one, but necessary to end suffering."

Rohde charged his task force with developing an evaluation process for horses that would determine which horses were adoptable and which were not, and that would also prevent unnecessary euthanasia. They followed the lead of the Asilomar Accords, established by the companion animal welfare industry in 2004. The set of standards defines medical and behavioral characteristics in animals as "healthy and treatable" or "unhealthy and untreatable."

The Harmony result was a 10-page evaluation matrix, *Definitions and Standards in Equine Evaluation for Impound Facility Intake*, by which Harmony could grade every condition and behavior those horse industry professionals could list, from cancer to strangles and cribbing to striking.

"It's a roadmap," says Dean Hendrickson, DVM, professor of surgery at Colorado State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital, and member of the task force, "so they know what to do with an animal when it comes through the door.

"The reality is there are only so many dollars to go around and you want to make sure you are using them well. It helps you look at things like, say, a broken leg. As a veterinarian, I can fix a lot of

## THE RIGHT HORSE INITIATIVE

**THE RIGHT HORSE INITIATIVE** is funded by the WaterShed Animal Fund, part of the Arnall Family Foundation, and based in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It is dedicated to bettering the lives of companion animals.

The Initiative's stated goal is "to massively increase the number of successful horse adoptions in the United States" by helping organizations that transform unwanted, abused or neglected horses and adopt them to the right owners. It also seeks to change the misconception that these horses are undesirable. Often they are good horses whose bad circumstances have put them in need of help.

To fulfill its mission, The Right Horse Initiative seeks to unite horse industry professionals and equine welfare advocates behind the common goal of encouraging responsible horse ownership and finding good homes for horses in need.

For more information, go to [therighthorse.org](http://therighthorse.org).

them, and have a horse pasture-sound. But in this case, would it be better to invest that money in 10 horses that are adoptable, that people can use and have as part of their lives?

“With the [*Definitions and Standards*] it’s spelled out what they’re going to do and they can justify it.”

To date, HEC has taken in more than 1,200 horses and has transitioned more than 850 horses to new homes or placement partners. Those total numbers increase weekly.

“Some of the horses that come through the program have been euthanized due to behavior and/or medical issues,” Leonard says. “We don’t euthanize based on time or space. We take everything in 30-day increments. As long as a horse is getting better [physically or behaviorally] we progress with it.

“Not everything that comes to us can be saved. We didn’t create the problem. It’s our job to come up with a solution.”

## THE PROCESS

It’s hard to connect the gelding trotting around the arena in a hackamore to the one the sale veterinarian called “the walking dead.” Today, Dash’s body condition score is far from a 1.

“We’ve had to cut him back [on feed],” Leonard admits.

Not long after his arrival, Harmony discovered most of Dash’s teeth were rotten and falling out. With his age estimated between 25 and 30, Dash was put on a mash diet of senior pelleted feed. In 90 days he gained 300 pounds. Leonard points out that age is no good excuse for a horse to be skinny. Dash has been adopted by Harmony as its official ambassador.

“When [these horses] come in, with the way they look or act, you think, ‘why would anyone want that horse?’ But we turn out some pretty nice horses,” Leonard says. “It’s a huge reward to see a horse get on a trailer and finally go home. But the process is the best part.

“To take a horse that is starving, get weight on him, train him, get his first ride and then get him adopted to the right person—it’s the process of saving a life. It’s amazing.” 🍷

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