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THE HORSE WHISPERERS

Walkin' N Circles Horse Ranch is rehabilitating and training horses, one equine at a time.



It's easy to see why Walkin' N Circles Horse Ranch is a safe haven for horses. It's peaceful and quiet at the ranch in Stanley, New Mexico. Everyone involved has a calm demeanor, including the furry friends who help. In addition to 50 horses on the property, two Great Pyrenees dogs keep coyotes at bay, and two goats call the ranch home.

Ruth Andrews, executive director, says she loves the rural landscape, but never thought she'd be in this position. Six years ago, she wanted horses but didn't get involved. "Now, I couldn't live without them," she says. "Horses are very sensitive to the human spirit—if you feel something for them, they feel it for you."

The New Mexico State Livestock Board regulates and inspects the ranch's facility and seizes horses in cases of neglect. Most commonly, people surrender them due to lack of preparation. "People get into situations they can't handle," Andrews says. "We try to get ahead of that curve by educating and offering training resources."

The ranch takes a hands-on approach with an orientation and volunteer ranchhand program. "It's the best way to learn how to handle a horse, and a great way for families to learn together," Andrews says. Volunteers are welcomed at all ages and skill levels to learn valuable lessons like never getting between two horses.

Currently, a trainer and vets volunteer their time with the 501(c)(3) nonprofit, along with 100 ranchhands that are responsible for feeding, cleaning stalls, grooming, and exercising the horses. One volunteer gained enough experience in her two years there to become a fully-qualified horse trainer. "A place like this gives you more than you can imagine," Andrews says.

Most of the horses are being rehabilitated and trained to eventually become rideable, so there isn't much riding done at the ranch. This takes a lot of work, and sometimes it never happens—but, ultimately, it's worth it. "It's a labor of love for everyone," she says.

Although each case is different, horses stay on the ranch for three to four years before they're adopted. As part of on the ground training, the team uses a stick and string apparatus to desensitize the horse

PHOTO BY DON JAMES/ATM

if he or she isn't comfortable with human interaction. "Having a gentle touch and non-threatening demeanor pays off," Andrews says. "Dogs don't do the same thing; they're not as keen on reading signals—energy and body language."

Like a dog rescue, however, fostering and adoption is available for the horses once they're ready. Fosters offer a home for the animals while the ranch pays for medical and hoof care. Adopters go through a probationary period of one year, and if everything goes well, the horse can stay. "We like to keep tabs on them and go inspect the facilities," Andrews says.

She encourages people who are interested in adopting to do their homework. A horse can cost up to \$3,000 a year to take care of, according to Andrews.

"It's a lot of work and you have to know what you're doing," she says. "You can't just leave them outside. They need feed twice a day, fresh water all the time, and regular medical checkups."

Horses come to the ranch at all stages—some with no training at all, some trained with only small refining needed, some injured. And, in some cases, the horses cannot be ridden. "Doing so makes the problems worse," Andrews says. The organization's goal is to find forever homes, fitting living circumstances as well as possible. "We don't like to adopt out a single-purpose horse, because once the purpose is completed, people are more likely to get rid of them," she says. "If you take a horse, it's a lifetime commitment." Horses can live to be 30 years old, and the two most well-trained horses on the property, Precious and Wendy, are right around that age. "They love everybody," Andrews says.

The ranch holds many different breeds, including a mule named Zero. In total, the ranch stretches 30 acres—20 actively used, and remaining 10 for expansion, as needed. Andrews says she always dreamt of having horses, now she has an entire family of them.

"It gives you a reason for living. There's a purpose here to help them," she says. "I don't think I'd get the same feeling owning my own horse. I don't ever want to leave here."

As part of fundraising, the Hug-a-Horse Thrift Store carries a variety of items. Benefits go to straight back to the ranch. Donations and supplies are always welcomed, and Andrews and the team welcome visitors (wnccr.org).

—OLIVIA TORRES



PHOTO BY DON JAMES/ATM

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