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Mission Possible

How can a local nonprofit change the world? By pinpointing one of its most sensitive biological corridors—and taking a holistic approach to restoring and conserving that natural ecosystem.

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They speak without words, and provide a larger-than-life-sized mirror of human

ABOUT TOWN

Horse Sense

They speak without words, and provide a larger-than-life-sized mirror of human emotions. Writer Nancy D. Lackey Shaffer visits a trio of local ranches to explore the healing powers of horses.
By Nancy D. Lackey Shaffer



Photo by Ryan Phillips
 In Newbury Park, Samantha Dippold saddles up for physical therapy with Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship.

ourists have flocked to Ventura County's beaches for decades, but her hillsides have their own appeal, particularly for equestrians. From Ojai to Hidden Valley, horse ranches dot the landscape and serve as pastoral retreats from the urban hustle closer to the coast. Ranches specializing in horse rescue, rehabilitation, and therapy serve as retreats for the animals, too—sanctuaries of health and healing for both the horses and the people who interact with them.

Rancho St. Francis, hidden away in a gated community in Camarillo, is 14 acres of equine paradise: rolling hills, shady oak trees, and large open spaces create a fitting landscape for 50 horses. Riding trails, training arenas, and spacious paddocks add to their exceptional comfort and care. "The goal is to be a resort for them," says ranch foreman Glenn Hogan. And he should know. As the son of Ed and Lynn Hogan, founders of Pleasant Holidays, he spent much of his professional career in the hospitality industry. Now that he's taken up the reins as a philanthropist (Hogan also serves on the board of the charitable Hogan Family Foundation), he extends that high level of attentiveness to the horses under his care.

And they need it. His ranch is a place of restoration and rehabilitation for injured, abused, neglected, and aging horses. Some are thoroughbreds abandoned after they've been hurt or passed their prime, some come from hoarding situations, and some have unknown but clearly distressing histories that have left

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emotions. Writer Nancy D. Lackey Shaffer visits a trio of local ranches to explore the healing powers of horses.

SHORT LIST

them physically and mentally traumatized. But a combination of high-quality veterinary care, customized diets, appropriate exercise, and attendance by compassionate and experienced trainers, ranch hands, and volunteers has worked wonders on Rancho St. Francis residents. Many have gone on to be adopted by loving and responsible owners, while others have remained in the “family” as equine therapy horses.

The Camarillo property was established in 2007 as an extension of the larger Hidden Valley-based Rancho St. Francis, which Ed Hogan founded in 2005 to teach low-income children horsemanship. “He believes that the compassion and care of animals will develop great character and kindness,” Glenn explains. Over time, their programs grew to include equine therapy, hippotherapy (a form of occupational therapy which uses the gait of the horse for neuromuskuloskeletal improvement), and adaptive riding for individuals with disabilities. Horses from the Camarillo site were originally trained for use in Hidden Valley, but eventually they started running their own therapy programs.

The benefits of equine therapy for people with Down syndrome, autism, and developmental disabilities have been well documented, but Rancho St. Francis explores the effects of the horse on the mind as well. Women recovering from homelessness, mental illness, and domestic violence benefit from the safe space created at Rancho St. Francis, while the Homefront program was developed for military families. “Our goal now is with the veterans coming back, helping them deal with PTSD, and re-integrating the families,” Hogan says. “The horses become a common activity that they can connect around.”

So what is it about horses that proves so therapeutic for many people? Hogan thinks it’s their ability to reflect what’s going on inside the humans interacting with them: “They feel and reflect our emotions. And because a horse is so large, it’s a bigger feedback or mirror on how you’re conducting yourself.”

“They speak to us without saying a word—that’s what’s so special about them,” says Adri Howe, president of the board of California Coastal Horse Rescue. The nonprofit, founded in 2000, currently plays host to 17 horses (including two minis) on an oak scrubland in the Ojai Valley, providing a sanctuary for “rescue, rehabilitation, and refuge.” Some of the horses that arrive on the 9.25-acre ranch are, like those at Rancho St. Francis, retired or abandoned racehorses, or escaping abuse situations. “But the economy plays a large part as well,” Howe says, explaining that sometimes owners simply can’t afford to care for these large, beautiful but expensive animals. “A lot of people don’t realize the work involved or the lifespan. There’s such a need for homes for elderly horses.”

CCHR is run by some 35 volunteers, who pitch in with mucking, tending the grounds, grooming, feeding, and other ranch work. The concierge-level of care includes the usual: vet and farrier visits, specialized nutrition (senior horses require their own diet), appropriate exercise, and pasture time. But they’ve also introduced Reiki sessions (administered by Lea Alexander of Animal Heart Strings), which Howe says have dramatically helped soothe and heal many of CCHR’s most highly stressed animals. “To see an animal that has had trust completely shattered start to reconnect—it’s just an incredible thing.”

The goal for many horses, beyond healing, is to rehabilitate them for adoption and possibly even equine therapy, so socializing the horses is key. “We’re trying to increase their ability to interact,” Howe explains. To that end, CCHR offers the Pony Tales Reading Club, where children come to the ranch and read out loud to horses. But it’s the unrelenting patience and dedication of CCHR volunteers that truly helps these rescue horses overcome their less-than-perfect pasts.

Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship deals in nearly every form of equine therapy and is a big employer of rehabilitated horses. With such a diverse menu of services, different types and sizes of horses are always needed. Prospects are evaluated for temperament and soundness, and spend around 30 days being trained in various elements of the program at the 13-acre site in Newbury Park (there's a smaller site in Chatsworth as well).

According to Sara Jones, the group's development director, one of the things that makes horses so well suited to therapy situations is that "they're just so honest. If you're doing something the horse doesn't want to do, it will tell you very quickly and unequivocally."

People with ADD/ADHD, autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, multiple sclerosis, and even traumatic brain injuries can get valuable sensory input from riding. Equine psychotherapy is helpful in the treatment of addiction and also forms part of Ride On's veterans program. As Jones says, "Horses help people bring out feelings and emotions they normally wouldn't express."

As these organizations show, the human-horse relationship is deep and nuanced, and there are many benefits (for both species) to exploring them. In Ventura County, we're lucky to have the kind of spaces that allow that depth of camaraderie to flourish.

For more information and volunteer opportunities, visit ranchostfrancis.org, calcoastalhorserescue.com, and rideon.org.



The Hogan Family Foundation's mission to enrich the lives of disadvantaged children began here, at Rancho St. Francis in Hidden Valley. A second ranch, in Camarillo, focuses on the care and rehabilitation of horses. *Photo by Adri Howe.*



Volunteers with California Coastal Horse Rescue, an Ojai Valley-based nonprofit that takes in abandoned, abused, neglected, and slaughter-bound horses. *Photo by Adri Howe.*



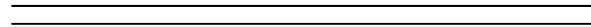
Volunteers with California Coastal Horse Rescue, an Ojai Valley-based nonprofit that takes in abandoned, abused, neglected, and slaughter-bound horses. *Photo by Adri Howe.*



Physical therapist Ruth Stern and Ride On volunteers assist Ben Hedge, sitting atop Sadie, during a Therapy Services treatment session. *Photo by Gloria Hamblin.*



Tiffany Lavorato, Alysen Tarnutzer, and Michele Mika trot along the trails of the Conejo Valley during an Adaptive Riding lesson. *Photo by Mark Brandes.*



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