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Farm of second chances

Sykesville facility opening this week pairs convicts, retired horses

By Charles Schelle
cschelle@patuxent.com

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Jeff Briselli was thankful to be outside in the humid air on a rainy Monday amidst 80 acres of green pastures on Slacks Road in Sykesville.

Briselli, an inmate at the Central Laundry Facility in Sykesville, is accustomed to confined spaces inside the prison off Buttercup Road, but about a mile away he's enjoying a different outlook as he works to make a home for horses that want the same thing as he does -- a new life.

"When you're sitting inside for two years, and you actually get a chance to come out, you don't want to do anything to mess it up," he said.

On Thursday, May 14, the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services will officially open Second Chances Farm on Slacks Road where supervised inmates from the minimum-security prison will learn skills, take classes and take care of retired thoroughbreds who have been neglected or abused.

It's the first program of its kind in the state, and will be operated by the non-profit Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, based in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

The farm operation is covered by the foundation. The barn's renovations cost about \$30,000 and have been funded through fundraising and the foundation.

Diana Pikulski, executive director of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, said it costs \$3 to \$4 to shelter and take care of one horse each day.

About 10 to 15 inmates will work on the farm. Inmates will learn to groom and care for the horses, said William Filbert Jr., warden of the Division of Correction's pre-release system.

The goal is to help inmates discover new job skills that could help them in the outside world, while helping the horses find a new home and a new life of their own. Otherwise, Filbert said, the horses might be destroyed.

"It's a good program ... that serves a dual purpose. It gives inmates training and, hopefully, provides a skill that is marketable upon release," he said. "And ... (it) gives the horses a second life, so to speak. Otherwise, they might be going outside the country for rendering."

Instead, horses at the farm may ultimately be adopted or be trained for uses ranging from equestrian, casual riding, polo, police honor guards and more, Filbert said.

Horses will likely come first from existing Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation farms, but officials eventually hope to strike partnerships with area rescue farms and with operators of Pimlico.

Having the grand opening during Preakness week brings back good memories for inmate James Pople, 49, of Woodlawn.

Pople worked at Pimlico about 20 years ago as a "hot walker" while his cousin's boyfriend jockeyed. He said he hopes to be included in the new program.

"I enjoyed it," he said of his time at the track.

Building skills and self-esteem are key parts of the program, Pikulski.

The foundation practices equine assistance psychotherapy, by which inmates learn to let go of aggression and use positive body language to gain trust of the horses, she said.

Briselli, 34, grew up in Salisbury and the Eastern Shore, and said he thinks it's not hard to gain the respect of a horse.

"You start off easy with a couple sugar cubes and they love you from then," he said.

It's not quite that easy, Pikulski said. The foundation's program focuses on teaching leadership skills and building trust with the horses, and it takes more than food to do that, she said.

Though last week he was helping prepare the farm for its new residents, Briscelli is not signed up for the program.

But he hopes he'll be in line to have an animal companion while in jail.

"Obviously we can't have pets where we're at, but it's nice to have contact with animals," he said.

"It just makes you feel good.

"Being out here makes you feel good, on farmland," he said.

Want to help?

The nonprofit Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation is seeking partners for the new Second Chance Farm in Sykesville. Partners can be people involved in racing, horse farms and rescues, as well as people interested in adoption or sponsoring a horse. Call 518-226-0028 or e-mail Diana Pikulski, executive director, at Diana@trfinc.org