

# Second Chances for horses and humans

Story and photographs by Maggie Kimmitt

As an inmate serving the final months of a 25-year sentence at the Central Maryland Correctional Facility, John Adams is looking for a second chance. And a new program implemented by the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (TRF) could give him just that.

In conjunction with the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, the TRF has launched one of its trademark pre-release vocational training programs in Sykesville, Md.

Appropriately, the facility is named Second Chances Farm.

Located on 80 acres of state land that previously was part of Springfield Hospital Center, and once used for cattle, the property was completely refurbished with a \$30,000 grant from the TRF.

The work was performed entirely by inmates under the direction of a correctional officer. The barn and silo were primed and repainted, new fencing was erected, and four spacious box stalls were built in the barn. Work began in May 2008, and the program's dedication took place this year on May 14.

Conni J. Swenson, the program coordinator, explained that Maryland's Secretary of Public Safety and Correctional

Services, Gary Maynard, was familiar with the TRF program, as he had implemented it in Iowa and several other states.

Maynard contacted Diana Pikulski, executive director of the TRF, about starting a program in Maryland.

"We already knew that this site was here and that it would be perfect," said Swenson, "so it was his desire to start a program. And this program does not cost the state of Maryland any money. Everything that we do, we do based on donations. We grow the program as the donations come in."

TRF pays for veterinary care, as well as hay and straw, and other basic items.

The inmates "would be working anyway," said Swenson. "They would be working on a detail somewhere. So they're getting paid to come here to learn rehabilitative skills and to take care of these rescued horses."

Program participants are chosen based on their behavior and the offense for which they are incarcerated. Their records must be free of violent crimes, and crimes against women, children or animals.

Selected inmates participate in a six-month Groom Elite certification course developed by Reid McLellan, Ph.D., and

used at various race tracks throughout the country.

McLellan is scheduled to visit Second Chances bimonthly to provide individualized instruction.

Three horses currently are in residence at Second Chances, all of them provided by Anne Lear of Winchester, Va., who fosters rescue cases for the TRF.

They are 4-year-old Seeking Revenge (called Stevie); Greek Ruler (Greek), 6; and Quite Rightly (Quinn), 11.

Stevie, a Maryland-bred son of Seeking Daylight, won three of his nine starts before an injured knee led to his retirement. West Virginia-bred Greek, a winner at 3, was literally pulled off of a van bound for a slaughter auction when Diana Pikulski learned of his intended fate. And Quinn, bred in Kentucky and found in the family of Sky Mesa and Bernstein, is a stakes-placed Miswaki gelding who made 45 starts and earned \$149,770.

"The TRF's goal is not to reschool the horses, but to provide a retirement for them," Swenson elaborated. "It is not a riding course, but a rescue program for the horses and a rehabilitation plan for the inmates. A horse that really cannot possibly have a second career can have one in this

program. Our basic responsibility is to care for the horse, and once we acquire the horses they are saved from slaughter. And they are used as learning tools for the inmates, so it's a win-win situation."

On a typical day, the program participants arrive at 7 a.m. and feed the horses. Then they hand-graze the horses and walk them through the pastures for two to three hours. Horses are brought into stalls only for course instruction and their daily grooming routines. After that they are returned to the pastures.

"We're trying to get these horses used to being handled, because they've actually been turned out in a pasture for three years," Swenson said. "They are going to become an integral tool in the gentlemen learning how to groom and handle a horse, so we have to make sure the horses get used to being handled again, and by several different people."

As was expected, Swenson quickly noticed that the each of the men was forming a bond with a particular horse. For Adams, it was Stevie.

"I just have a love of animals; I'm really an animal fanatic," Adams said. "I take him out to the pastures for walks, and I'm at peace with myself. He's at peace out there. If I could have done this 10 years ago—if they had had this program then—I would have done it."

The TRF does supply a local adoption specialist who will work to place as many of the horses as possible. While admitting that it could be tough to see some of the horses leave the farm, Swenson comforts herself and the participants with the knowledge that they will be able to help even more horses by constantly rotating their herd.

"That is the saving grace," she added. "But if they cannot be adopted out, of course we'll take care of them for the rest of their lives."

The goal is to eventually have 40 to 60 horses on the property, with a maximum of 15 inmates enrolled in the program for each six-month certification session.

Swenson noted the high success rate the TRF has experienced with placing inmates in jobs within the equine industry after they have received their certificates.

“They can go to farms, training facilities, therapeutic facilities. This is a precursor for any veterinary assistant work that they might be interested in pursuing,” Swenson said.

When a farrier donated her services to the program and came out to trim each of the horses, Adams decided that farriery was a trade he wanted to learn more about.

“I talk to my sister once a week,” he said. “She knows I’m in this program, and she asked me if there is anything she can look up for me. So I told her to pull up some stuff about farriers. The girl who was here was really good, and she gave us a lot of information about it.”

Donnie Joe Goodman was the very first individual accepted into the program in Maryland. As such, he also helped with the redevelopment of the property. A native of Reisterstown, Md., he is the only current program participant who has prior experience with horses.

“My parents had horses when I was little,” he said. “They owned a few race horses that ran at Charles Town.”

Added Goodman: “They are amazing animals and I enjoy being around them. I first heard about the program about six months ago and was anxious for this to get started. I had another job within the system, and then they sent out the flyer about this and I applied. I did a lot of the work on this place, and there was a lot of work here. But you see a lot of nature out here, and I’m happy to be out here every day.”



*Clockwise from top: Sign announces the new facility. Participants (from left) include Wilson Pete Rodriguez, Eddie Rybolt, Donnie Joe Goodman holding Greek Ruler (Greek), John Adams and Edward J. Stepney. Seeking Revenge (Stevie) has formed a special bond with John Adams. Quite Rightly (Quinn) relaxes under the handling of Eddie Rybolt.*

While most of the trainees spend six to eight hours Monday through Friday at the farm, Goodman enjoys the privilege of a seven-day detail.

“I get to come out on weekends, too,” he said. “I get here and I don’t want to leave.” Upon completion of his sentence and his certificate, Goodman hopes to earn his living with horses.

“Maybe I can work with horses instead of doing construction work my whole life,” he reflected. “It might be a nice

change. I’m excited. And when I do graduate, I want to come back here and bring my kids over so they can see this place, these horses and what all of this has done for me.”

Founded in 1982 by Monique Koehler, the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation created its flagship program two years later at Wallkill Correctional Facility in Wallkill, N.Y. Still going strong, the TRF program at Wallkill proved that inmates could find an avenue to turn

their lives around by becoming involved in the daily care of horses.

Today, the TRF sponsors 10 retirement facilities, seven of which are linked to correctional programs. The correctional center concept is also currently in practice within the Mid-Atlantic region at the James River Work Center in Crozier, Va., and Wateree River Correctional Facility in Rembert, S.C. For more information, visit [www.trfinc.org](http://www.trfinc.org). ✨