



horse sense business sense

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL EQUINE ASSISTED PROGRAM

Rescued Horses Rescue People

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Real Help, Real Healing, Real Results™

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“Rescued Horses Rescue People” is the headline on one of *Horse Sense*’s most effective advertisements. As many who’ve read the *Horse Sense, Business Sense* book already know, *Horse Sense* was founded out of a passion to provide a win-win opportunity for horses and humans alike. After volunteering for several rehab and adoption places in North Carolina and the Southeast, I realized that until we could find homes for the young, unrideable horses that filled the rehab barns, we’d never be able to help the abused and neglected horses that also never seemed to stop coming. It was simply a matter of finite space and pasture.

When I speak to Equine Assisted Therapy & Learning organizations about working with “rescued horses,” I’m often asked what I mean by “rescue.” My definition is actually quite broad. I’m not just referring to horses who are unrideable for physical reasons, such as ones who have navicular or ataxia, or those who have survived extended neglect and mistreatment, such as starvation or outright physical abuse. My personal definition of a “rescued” horse also extends to many of the horses trained or raised in more normal environments as well. I think most of us know at least one or two horses experiencing mild to extreme forms of abuse in places that don’t necessarily look threatening at first glance. But it’s the horses who are perfectly healthy and well-suited for our programs, albeit unrideable, who are waiting for good homes that I’d like to concentrate on in this article.

Why rescued horses? First, it’s a good deal for the horses. Horses who are otherwise thought to be “worthless” to the larger horse community can still have a future that doesn’t involve slaughter. What galls me to this day is the idea that a horse is “useless” just because he or she can’t be ridden by people. Unfortunately many horses end up at

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slaughter-houses in the US, Canada and Mexico that fit this description. Although I may not be able to convince all horse owners that horses have value separate and apart from what can be done with them, I **can** find a way to offer such horses a happy, long life.

Second, it's a good deal for the clients. I find lots of similarities in the "rehab" process of horses and humans, (although with people we often call it treatment or therapy or personal development). Through my own personal experience, and the experience of countless others, most any kind of horse can be deeply therapeutic for people. But, as the recent bestseller *Chosen by a Horse* relates, "rescued" horses have a particular gift in bringing out our own healer and hence our own healing. Although the horse may be long past the trauma or abuse that brought him or her to our attention, many clients come to us with similar backgrounds, and identify with these horses immediately and intimately. Empathy develops in a client where it may not have been before, and a door is opened to the possibility of a happy, healthy life, no matter what the challenges. Am I speaking of the horse or the client? The answer is "Both." Don't we believe our clients can, no matter what their issues, go on to lead happy lives? Isn't that what we also wish for all horses, even unrideable ones?

Finally, utilizing "rescued" horses **in** your program is good **for** your program. Although it certainly wasn't our original intent, rescued horses offer good public relations for *Horse Sense* and potentially for your organization as well. It's a way people can understand more about who you are and what you do before they ever show up on your doorstep. What does it say about your organization that you offer help and caring for horses who otherwise would be thrown away? Does it not also reflect your goal in helping your community? How

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we do anything is how we do everything. What do your horses say about your program or your program's philosophy?

Personally, I also find it a way to "give back" to all the horses I've known and loved. Many people who have heard me speak know that I often equate the client with the horse: if we remain passive when horses are called "useless" because they can't be ridden, does that not smack of giving up on and locking up people who are differently-abled or physically and emotionally challenged?

One of the main criticisms I hear about rescued horses doing EAP/EAL is that it's harmful to the horses. I would completely agree that any horse not thoroughly and sufficiently rehabilitated in mind, body and spirit is not appropriate for EAP/EAL. And certainly we know that some rehabilitated horses will not be suitable for the work even after rehab; they may not have a constitution that fits. But it's not these horses I'm talking about.

Rescued horses at *Horse Sense* undergo a long and carefully process to restore their physical, mental and emotional well-being before ever stepping foot near a client. Only after health is re-established at all three levels do we evaluate the horse's suitability for EAP/EAL work. Even then, after integration with the program, we constantly monitor our horses to check for their balance. We don't hesitate to pull a horse from the program for short or long periods of time, as necessary.

This principle parallels the health of the human treatment team offering EAP/EAL. Are we healthy and balanced *enough*—emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually—to offer this service? If the answer is "no," we do no one a service at all by seeing clients. Does that

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mean we are constantly in perfect balance? No. Being healthy is a process, not an event. That's why we are always checking in with each other and our horses as we continue to provide EAP/EAL.

I'm not suggesting that rescued horses are they only horses that can do EAP/EAL, nor that all programs should use nothing but such horses. I am saying that as horse lovers who hopefully see beyond a horse's "rideability," it's our responsibility as well as our privilege to have these horses in our barns.

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