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Hitchin Post

News from Refuge Ranch

Spring 2011

Redemption

by Chris Daniels

As I wound my way through the narrow, country lanes, the bleak scenery that flew past my window testified that winter still held the landscape firmly in its grasp. This day, however, spring was making a valiant effort to announce its arrival. The sun streamed through the windshield, covering me like a warm blanket, and the balmy air allowed me the pleasure of driving with my windows down for the first time in months.

Despite the beauty of the early, spring day, this road trip found me in a somber mood. A few weeks earlier the Ranch had received information regarding a nearby rescue operation. This was one of the worst cases of neglect the state had seen in quite some time. Thirteen horses had been found already dead. Starved and in their weakened condition, they had been unable to withstand the brutal winter storms that had pummeled central Illinois. Twenty six others were left in varying stages of starvation and neglect. The situation had received a fair amount of media attention and had even been billed as a "concentration camp for horses." A small equine rescue facility was spearheading the efforts and was overwhelmed with the magnitude of the case. I was heading down to see if there was any way Refuge could help, as well as evaluate the horses to find one or two in need of the love and rehabilitation we could offer.

Because the farm where the horses were located was well off the beaten path, I had arranged to meet the rescue director, Steve Alexander, at a nearby, small, country church. I arrived first, parked my car and waited for a few minutes before his truck rumbled into view. With a wave he motioned for me to follow him onto the winding gravel road behind the church. We navigated around the sharp curves and over the steep hills that made up the rolling landscape.

Finally we pulled off of the road and into the drive. I climbed out of my car, taking a first look around as I shook the director's offered hand.

The old farm looked much as I had pictured it in my mind's eye. The property was cluttered with old, rusted farm equipment. Baling wire, glass, and all manner of trash littered the ground. The first thing to catch and hold my attention, however, was a small paddock in front of the dilapidated barn where a dozen or so horses milled around a newly placed round bale of hay. Their coats were shaggy and caked with mud and their bellies were distended with the telltale sign of a heavy parasite load.

As Steve and I approached the fence he pointed out two young horses in particularly bad shape. Probably not much more than a year old, this pair were significantly thinner than the rest of the horses in the enclosure. As the youngest and weakest of the herd, they had no doubt been pushed away by the stronger, more dominant horses from what little food may have been provided. As a result the harsh winter had taken a terrible toll on their little bodies. Steve shared that these were two of several he was planning to move to his own small facility for rehabilitation.

We pushed away from the fence and began to make our way around the side of the property, navigating around the mud and scraps of metal. As we walked, Steve shared his frustration with the overwhelming situation. There were too many horses to move them all to the safety of his small facility. Instead, he was making several trips to this farm each day to try and provide for their basic needs. Most of the horses were wild and distrustful of humans and would not allow any contact. Those born on the property had never been handled and were not even halter broke. Getting them caught, vetted and--most challenging-- loaded into a trailer to be moved was going to be a major task.

To complicate matters even more, fueled by the news stories on TV and in the paper, gawkers were showing up at the farm to see the horses. Others, more well-intentioned, were coming to throw hay



One of the horses at this farm, starving and living amidst mounds of trash and debris

Every bone was visible beneath her shaggy, mud-crusting coat. Her hips jutted out at sharp angles against the backdrop of the debris filled paddock where she was housed. I stood there staring at them, heart-broken at the thought of all that they had endured. Their thin bodies lacked the insulating fat needed to protect them from the sub-zero temperatures, fierce winds, and driving ice and snow that had pounded the area just a few weeks prior. I reminded myself that these were the lucky ones. Somehow they had mustered the strength and the will to survive, where so many of the others could not.

My heart was heavy as we turned to continue the tour. The huge, wooden barn must have been lovely at one time, but years of neglect had taken their toll on the run down structure which was now in a sad state of disrepair. As we crossed the threshold into the barn, Steve explained that many of the horses housed here were stallions. It seemed as though the owner had been attempting to run a breeding program and this was where they had been kept separated from the mares and from each other. The barn was dark and damp and we had to pick our way carefully through the trash laden aisle. To the left, a row of stalls ran the length of the barn. The floor where these once majestic horses were forced to stand was covered in a deep layer of manure and muck. We made our way down the aisle pausing to peer into stall after stall. It seemed each horse was in a sadder state than the last. Most of them stared back at us from the far corner of their small pens, wide eyed and leery of any human contact. One stallion in particular caused a lump to rise in my throat. His hooves were so long and overgrown that they jutted out at an unnatural angle, forcing him to stand on his pasterns, the narrow joint above the hoof.

Up ahead and to the right in the center of the barn was an indoor arena holding another small group of mares. These too were fearful and shied away from me, but they nickered at Steve in anticipation of feeding time. Tucked behind one of the mares and peering out at us with a bit more curiosity was a precious foal, probably not more than a few months old. The gravity of the situation and the weight of so many suffering animals felt oppressive as I looked around in despair. We had nearly finished our tour when I asked Steve, “Where is the stallion you told me about earlier? The one that may not make it?”

He gestured to the far side of the barn where there were a few more makeshift stalls. Most stood empty, but in the dim light I could just make out the shape of one last horse. We approached his stall and his gaunt frame came more clearly into view. As I placed my hands on the panel in front of me, I sucked in my breath. Here was truly a creature that had given up on life. His eyes were dull and sunken and his head drooped until his nose nearly touched the ground. His skin hung over his skeletal frame, every bone visible beneath the ragged brown and white coat. Supporting the weight of his own body seemed to require all his focus and energy and his back legs shook unsteadily with the effort it took to simply remain on his feet. I cringed as rats scurried about the old wood and trash that littered the floor around his stall, but he didn't move or even seem to notice. He was completely focused inward, unwilling or unable to connect with the world around him.

I turned to Steve. “I want to give him a chance. If it's at all possible, I want to take him and give him a chance.” I spoke before I had really thought through the implications of my words. This poor horse was in no shape to withstand a trailer ride. I had no idea how we would get him home, but that didn't matter. I just wanted to get him out of there.

“Really?” Steve sounded uncertain and concerned.

I rushed to reassure him. “I realize he may not make it. We can be back here in 2 days with a trailer. I understand that if his condition gets any worse, you'll need to make the decision to euthanize him. But if there is any chance for him, he needs to get out of this horrible stall. If we can get him out of here, I think he might have a chance.”

and feed to the horses. Though their hearts were in the right place, most people do not realize that bringing a severely emaciated horse back to a healthy weight can be tricky. Feed has to be introduced slowly and carefully. Too much too quickly can cause an already weak and dehydrated animal more trauma, or even death. In their effort to help, these good samaritans were only adding worry and stress to Steve's already very full plate. However, someone had to do something, and this big hearted man had taken on the challenge.

As we walked, Steve shared about the various horses on the property. One horse in the barn had him particularly concerned. The stallion was in worse shape than most of the others and seemed to not be responding to efforts to rehabilitate him so far. Steve confided that he was not sure if euthanizing him might not be the most humane thing at this point. I nodded in response, understanding well the weight of having to make such a difficult decision.

We approached the next pen and my heart sank. This one was much smaller and contained only two horses – a paint stallion and a palomino mare. The mare was a sad sight.

Mark Your Calendar



- April 4** **Ranch Opens!**
- April 10** **Rochester Christian Church Children's Ministry Service Day**
- May 6 - 7** **Benefit Garage Sale**
- May 14** **Round Up! 1:00- 3:00**
- June 11** **Round Up! 1:00 - 3:00**
- July 16** **Round Up! 1:00-3:00**
- August 13** **Round Up! 1:00-3:00**
- October 1** **Mane Event!**
Open House & Chili Cook Off
- October 31** **Ranch closes for winter**



Steve nodded, still uncertain, but in agreement that he needed to get out of there if there was any hope that he might survive. The next couple of days were a flurry of activity and preparation. I prayed fervently that the struggling horse would hold on long enough for us to get him out of there. Steve and I spoke on the phone several times over the course of the next couple of days, and each time I held my breath, hoping to hear that he was still clinging to life, that they had not had to put him down.

Two days later, my husband, Stephen, and I hitched up the trailer and made our way back down the winding roads to the dilapidated property. I was a bundle of nerves. Had his condition worsened over the last couple of days? Would he be able to handle the hour or so it would take to get him home in the trailer? Would we be able to get him on the trailer at all? I knew that he'd had very little human contact for many years, and stallions can be aggressive and unpredictable. We pulled around to the barn and Stephen backed the trailer strategically into place, praying that somehow we could avoid picking up a nail or some other sharp object that might puncture a tire.

After introducing him to Steve Alexander, we walked into the barn. Stephen viewed the scene with the same overwhelming sadness I had felt when I walked through - so many beautiful horses that had been allowed to waste away in silent suffering. He paused to smile gently at the foal in the center of the barn. It was impossible not to be drawn to the gangly legs and sweet face that peered at us with such bright curiosity.

Finally we came to that last stall, and as we approached, my jaw dropped in astonishment. This did not look like the same horse I had seen just two days prior. His bones still jutted from beneath his skin in harsh angles, every rib and vertebrae visible, however, everything about the way he held himself had changed. His haunches no longer shook with the effort of staying on his feet. His neck no longer sagged beneath the

weight of his head. In fact, as we moved toward him, he swung his nose around to warily observe our approach, his eyes alert and fearful. Somehow, at some point over the last couple of days, this horse had chosen to live! I turned to Steve with a broad grin and said, "He doesn't even look like the same horse!"

"I know," Steve replied, answering with a grin of his own. "He's really turned around in the last couple of days. I have to admit, we were pretty worried about the trailer ride, but I don't think he'll have any problems now."

I nodded in enthusiastic agreement. I couldn't believe the improvement! Now there was just the small detail of getting him loaded. I slipped into the stall, armed with a halter, lead rope, and a can of grain. The frightened horse quickly swung his backside toward me and retreated to the farthest corner of the small pen. This was not going to be easy. It took us nearly an hour of gentle coaxing before he finally allowed us to slip the rope over his neck and halter him.

Not once, though it was obvious he was terrified, did he respond aggressively or spitefully. We carefully led him from the stall and into the aisle. His eyes were wide with fear, every muscle taught with anxiety. Still, he followed willingly.



Remi's coat was horrid when he arrived, due to lack of nutrition and a severe lice infestation. Eventually he shed out and was left almost completely bald until his new coat came in.



Remi is slowly learning to trust people.

As stepped out of the barn and into the open, he snorted and danced around me. I couldn't help but wonder how long it had been since he had been out of that stall or seen the sky above his head. I was delighted to have him out of that dark, oppressive barn. However to him, the bright daylight and wide open spaces must have been terrifying after so long in his familiar, cramped pen. It seemed almost too much for him as he spun to look at the horses first on one side of him and then the other.

Seeing him now, out in the light, his condition looked even worse. His coat was not just shaggy and crusted with mud and manure, but there were large patches of hair loss and scabbed over sores covering his face and torso.

I reached out a hand to stroke his neck and spoke to him softly in an effort to quiet him, but the contact only seemed to distress him more. I decided that the best thing would be to simply load him quickly, with as little fuss as possible. Again he followed willingly as I set off. Slowly, I stepped into the back of the trailer putting gentle pressure on the lead line to coax him in after me. I was absolutely blown away when, after only a moment's hesitation, he jumped in behind me and quickly found the bag of hay tied inside. Breathing a silent prayer of thanks, I climbed out and secured the door behind me. With an enormous grin and an even bigger sigh of relief, I turned and high fived Steve who was watching from a few feet away. I was ecstatic! It could not have gone better than it did.

Moments later, Stephen and I were back in the truck and headed toward home with our precious cargo. While I knew this poor boy had a very long way to go, I couldn't help but rejoice inwardly. I knew the hardest part was over and there were nothing but good things in his future.

Over the next few days we settled him in and began the process of helping him shed out the long, matted coat that was plastered to his skin. As we peeled away the old hair we were dismayed to see that he was virtually bald underneath. Lack of nutrition and, we discovered, a severe lice infestation had robbed him of the ability to grow new hair. Still, I knew that the old filth had to be stripped away so that a new, shiny summer coat could come in as his body was given the nourishment it so desperately needed.

As with every new horse that arrives, we began looking for a name that would suit him. Several were tried but none seemed to me the perfect fit. Then a friend suggested Redemption, or Remi for short. "The central theme of redemption," she wrote, "is that God has taken the initiative to act compassionately on behalf of those who are powerless to help themselves."

I loved the name. I loved the picture! Remi is a living reminder that we, who are absolutely powerless to get ourselves out of the desperate situation we find ourselves in, have been rescued by the only One who has the power to save us. It was all His initiative. We did nothing to earn or deserve the salvation and love that He lavishes on us. That is the story here – the bigger picture.

Yes, a horse was saved, but ultimately his redemption story points to a greater, eternal picture of salvation that involves a cross, a tomb and your response to the One who conquered them both so that you might be Redeemed.

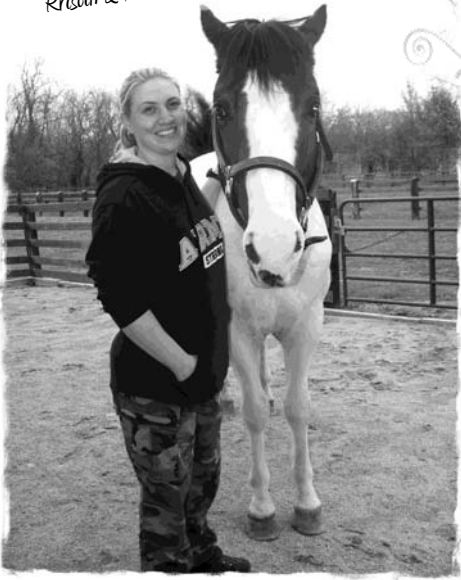


Enjoying some grazing time, starting to fill out, and his coat looking much better!



Shortly after he arrived, extremely thin and fearful.

Kristin & Remi



THANKS!

One of my favorite things about the Ranch is watching the way God takes a variety of people, with completely different gifts, talents, passions, and backgrounds and uses them to accomplish an amazingly unique ministry here at Refuge!

It has been both humbling and joyful to partner with individuals who find creative and unexpected ways to use their talents at the Ranch. One recent gift has driven this truth home to me again when were gifted with a beautiful set of picnic tables.

Over the last several years, Kristin Polley and her grandparents Jack and Phyllis Wyatt have done some

incredible wood working for the Ranch. Their gifts have included several sturdy benches, engraved with our name, as well as a name plaque for every horse that has called Refuge home. Their unique gifts have blessed the Ranch adding beauty and function to our small property. If the Ranch is open, then you can be sure that someone is enjoying at least one of these precious gifts! We're so grateful for their creativity and willingness to share their talent with us.



Annual Benefit Garage Sale

It's time for our annual Garage Sale! Dates this year are **May 6 & 7** and the address is **313 Winter Park, Chatham, IL**. If you would like to donate your gently used items for the sale, you can drop them off at the above address on April 29 & 30 or May 5 between 9:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m.

Yes, I would like to partner with
Refuge Ranch!

Refuge Ranch is a 501c3 non profit organization. All gifts are tax deductible and will be acknowledged by a quarterly contribution receipt. If you would prefer not to receive a contribution receipt, please note that with your donation.

Payment Method:

I have enclosed a check payable to Refuge Ranch for \$ _____.

I would like to commit a monthly donation in the amount of \$ _____. Please send me one year's supply of pre-addressed envelopes.

Send donations to:
Refuge Ranch,
3845 Delay Rd.,
Pawnee, IL 62558

You can also make your donation by credit card or PayPal at:

www.refuge-ranch.org

My Donation is:

In Honor of: _____

In Memory of: _____

Please send acknowledgement to:

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____

Email: _____

HOW CAN I HELP?

This is a question we are frequently asked at the Ranch. The answer? There are countless ways to get involved! Running a farm requires an immense amount of work and we are always in need of an extra set of hands to help with chores and projects. Mowing, trimming, staining, weeding, building, repairing—much of the work on a farm is far from glamorous, but these are the day to day tasks that keep Refuge safe and beautiful for the kids and families who come here to rest and play. In addition there are several items that we are always in need of:

- * **Cases of Water!** On hot summer days, we go through a LOT of water!
- * **Freeze Pops** are always a favorite snack.
- * Bird seed goes almost faster than we can fill the feeders made by the kids!
- * Gift cards for Big R, Tractor Supply Company, or Menards are a huge blessing.
- * Particularly in the Spring, we are always looking for creative crafts, games, ideas and materials for activities that will engage the kids when it is raining or too wet to ride or work with the horses. Crafts with a farm or horse theme are favorites and items like construction paper, finger paints, scrapbooking materials, etc. can always be used. We'd love to hear your ideas as well!
- * Out door play items like hula hoops, nerf balls, bubbles, water guns, etc are always a hit.

Donation items can be dropped off at the Ranch during our open hours: Mondays & Wednesdays from 1:00—6:30 p.m. or on Saturdays from 10:30—4:30. If you've never been here, we'd love to meet you and show you around!

For more information on how you can get involved, check out our website at www.refuge-ranch.org



Refuge Ranch
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