

Adirondack Reprivee

Horse rescue gives
unwanted animals a
second chance on life

By John Gereau

A photograph of a woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a white tank top, smiling and petting the nose of a dark brown horse. The horse has a white blaze on its face and is wearing a blue halter. The background is a bright blue sky with some clouds.

Natalia DeValinger poses with Johnny Cash, a horse that was rescued by Adirondack Equine Center & Horse Rescue.

Photo by John Gereau

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Griffin Ward spends a bit of quality time with two of the rescue horses at Adirondack Equine Center & Horse Rescue. Griffin, of New Jersey, was celebrating his 12th birthday on a trail ride with his mom Julia.

Photo by John Gereau

“It’s contagious, saving a horse from cruelty or slaughter. Life should be about making a difference — about leaving this world a better place than we found it. We are making a difference, one animal at a time.”

— Natalia DeValinger, co-owner of Adirondack Equine Center & Horse Rescue

A cool, late August breeze blew through the grounds of the nordic complex at Mt. Van Hoevenberg as Natalia and Travis DeValinger worked to saddle up the rank and file who anxiously waited to experience the region’s beauty on horseback.

At the same time, few of the riders were aware that these composed, sturdy animals were once destined for a life of cruelty or the slaughterhouse floor.

It’s been said the eyes are the gateway to the soul. Perhaps nowhere is that more evident than in the gaze of these creatures, who seem to understand their fate would have been different had they not been given this second chance.

And they embrace it.

“It’s contagious, saving a horse from cruelty or slaughter,” Natalia said with a deep smile. “Life should be about making a difference — about leaving this world a better place than we found it.”

“We are making a difference, one animal at a time.”

The concept of rescuing horses for use in their trail riding business began in 2006 when the DeValingers answered an ad in *Want Ad Digest* for a Belgian mare. When they arrived they found the animal diseased, emaciated and malnourished, more than 500 pounds underweight. Her 3-month-old foal by her side was in similar condition.

“The foal was a rack of bones, you could actually pick her up, which you shouldn’t have been able to do with a horse of her age,” Natalia said.

The couple knew what they had to do and decided to nurse the two animals back to health. From that moment on their life’s work became helping to reduce the unwanted horse population, and

Adirondack Equine Center & Horse Rescue was born.

Rescuing unwanted horses comes with its own host of challenges. Many are in need of expensive medical care and have been abused and neglected, their owners casting them off because they can no longer afford the nearly \$3,000 a year it costs to care for a horse.

The floundering economy has compounded the problem. The number of abandoned horses is at an all-time high — which is where the slaughter brokers enter the picture.

The demand for horsemeat for human consumption in places like Europe and Asia is high. It can fetch up to \$20 a pound in these markets, where it is considered a delicacy, making its export a tantalizing business opportunity to American buyers.

While the slaughter of horses for human consumption is not legal in the U.S., that is not the case in nearby countries like Canada and Mexico. The seven federally licensed slaughterhouses in Canada alone butcher more than 100,000 horses annually, and there is nothing stopping American buyers from exporting them there. Through mid-July of this year, nearly 400,000 horses had been exported from the United States for slaughter. That compares to just 286,000 in 2011.

One of the largest horse auctions in the Northeast takes place in New Holland, Pa. Some are saved by ranchers and horse rescue organizations like Adirondack Equine, but a vast majority — more than 80 percent — are purchased for slaughter, as many as 300 per week.

It is a stark reality few in this country have knowledge of, Travis said.

“People simply don’t know it is happening until you put it in front of them,” he said.



While the DeValingers started by taking in what they considered disadvantaged horses, they soon realized the problem was oceans deeper than that.

"We really didn't understand at the time just how deep it went," Travis said while hurriedly snacking on a late lunch between trail rides. "The more we got into it, the more we realized how big the problem is."

The union of Travis and Natalia seems to lend itself perfectly to their objective of saving horses. Travis grew up on a horse farm in Saranac Lake, and Natalia is a veterinarian technician — sort of the human equivalent of an emergency medical technician — able to administer drugs, start an IV, and diagnose certain ailments.

These specialized skills helped the couple nurse the Belgian mare, named Rosie, and her foal, named Anne, back to health. A forage based diet of pellets and hay helped the horses slowly regain lost weight, and antibiotics helped cure a syndrome known as "elephant leg." Both horses also needed worm medication and each suffered from a painful fungus that attacks the animal under the skin, known as rain rot. Their hooves had also been neglected.

"Rosie actually had holes in her hoof, and her coat was literally falling off," Natalia said.

While Rosie eventually had to be humanely euthanized, Anne is now a healthy 6-year-old filly, happy to be stable mates with the 40 or so other horses that call Adirondack Equine home, which is maximum capacity for the DeValingers.

"We get calls every day from people looking to locate a horse,"

Pictured above are before and after photos of Rosie and her foal Anne. The horses were rescued in 2006 by Travis and Natalia DeValinger and nursed back to health.

Photos provided by Adirondack Equine

Natalia said. "It is heart wrenching — you want to save them all, but you just can't."

While the business is a for-profit, the couple said they are definitely not in it for the money, but rather to do their part in offering a nurturing home to horses that would otherwise not have one.

Hay costs alone push the \$40,000 mark annually, and veterinarian and grain expenses add another \$1,000 a month or so to the bottom line.

"We make enough to keep the lights on and the horses fed," Natalia said, again through a warm smile. "Many people want more — the expensive house and car. There is so much greed in the world."

"But you can't put a price on how it feels to save an animal from cruelty or an untimely death. I decided long ago that is what I wanted of life."

As Natalia finished speaking, Travis rounded the corner, leading the latest group of nine people back from their hour-long ride.



Horses with names like Ranger, Sparky, Luna, Sinatra, George, Willy and Munchie walked slowly and obediently into the staging area, and heads lowered to munch on hay.

The DeValingers employ a resistance-free method of training their horses, many of which came with bad habits like biting or kicking, a product of the abuse they endured.

But over time and with positive reinforcement, and lots of love, the horses eventually begin to respond, becoming

the gentle creatures they were meant to be.

Rosie's foal Anne is a perfect example.

"She is such a sweetheart," Travis said, stroking her mane.

The DeValingers, who operate out of AuSable Chasm in the spring, Lake Placid in the summer and provide sleigh rides at the Lake Placid Club in the winter, employ three stablehands.

One of the employees, Nick Cunningham, is also a member of the U.S. Bobsled Team. He trains throughout the day, then helps lead trail rides at the nordic complex down the road.

"These guys put in 16 hour days, so by the time I get here, they are usually ready for a break," Cunningham said.

Originally from California, Cunningham ran track in college in Idaho. He tried out for the bobsled team on a whim at the urging of his parents, and to his surprise made it. Now, he finds respite from his training regiment working with the horses at Adirondack Equine.

"It's amazing what they do with these horses," he said. "These horses come here abused. It is not like they can just take them out — it takes a serious time investment to get them to how you see them today."

But, it is worth it in the end, he said.

"The horses love people and the people love the horses," he said.

Another employee, 18-year-old Brittany Irvine, said she also believes deeply in the rescue. She has two horses of her own at her home in Bloomingdale.

"I think it's great; it's a great program," Irvine said. "You wouldn't even know these horses are rescue horses. They are just super to work with."

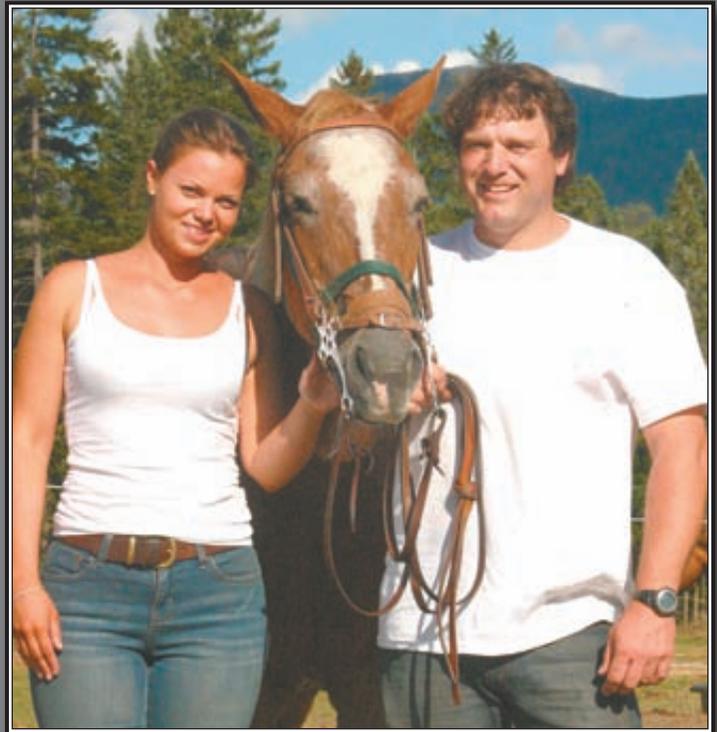
What does the future hold for the DeValingers?

The couple most definitely plans to continue rescuing unwanted horses, and hopes to someday turn the operation into a not-for-profit, raising the funds needed to help more animals.

Meanwhile, a larger indoor arena would be a welcome addition to the couple's farm in AuSable. The arena would allow more teaching opportunities to youth, Natalia said. A children's camp is also in the works that would offer "all things equine" to kids ages 7-18. A rehabilitation center offering services to the disabled is another idea the duo is contemplating.

What will always be at the core for this North Country couple, however, is the burning desire to end suffering, whatever the form.

"In reality, we are all in the same boat, whether we choose to



At left: Travis DeValinger takes out a trail ride in Lake Placid.

Above: The DeValingers pose with Dreamboat Annie, a horse they saved from being slaughtered in 2010.

Below: Stablehand and U.S. Bobsled Team member Nick Cunningham takes a quick break from his duties helping out at Adirondack Equine Center & Horse Rescue.

Photos by John Gereau

associate with animals or not, our similarities are very obvious," Natalia said. "By this, I mean that everyone should make a difference, whether it is saving an injured animal off the road or helping a human child succeed at school and in life — we only have so many years to live, and finding success in helping others should be our number one motivation."

