

Journey to Recovery

South Florida Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals rescues eight Paso Finos

By Georgia Brown.

The anonymous call came from riders who saw emaciated horses in dirt paddocks at the back of a property as they rode along a canal bank near Homestead, Florida.

“Most of our calls are anonymous,” said Laurie Waggoner, executive director of the South Florida Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Laurie is a single mom and the only investigator in Dade County for large animals, volunteer work she does in addition to her full time job at Publix. Getting horses out of bad situations, watching them change from skeletons into noble animals, is work she does willingly.

“It’s what I do,” she says simply. When Laurie arrived to investigate on a steaming July afternoon, there was no hint of a breeze. She found eight Paso Finos and a donkey hidden from the road by an overgrown 15-foot fichus hedge. They had eaten every portion of the hedge they could reach.

In the dry, bare yard, a Ferrari, an old Lamborghini and a Corvette looked like the horses – wrecks dangerously close to the point of no return. But ironically, in the driveway were a new Mercedes and a Hummer. The house on the farm told more of the story, a derelict McMansion, damaged by fire.

Law enforcement officers often call on Laurie to investigate cases. Much of her work is educating owners who do not realize they are not giving their horses adequate care. In obvious cases of neglect where animals have not been given adequate food and water, Florida law permits the SPCA to confiscate them immediately. If the owners are ordered by the court to relinquish ownership, the animals are awarded to the SPCA for placement.

Laurie returned with her trailer and a team of volunteers to help load the horses. This trip would bring the number of horses rescued by the South Florida SPCA to 60, more than the total number during 2002. A donkey weighing only 187 pounds had to be carried to the trailer.

The veterinarian who examined them and took blood samples was cautiously optimistic about their recovery. Testing proved all had severe anemia from months of inadequate food. On a scale of 1 to 9, with 1 being

emaciated and 0 obese, four were ones.

The next day, Linda Baca, Seminole Feed's South Florida equine nutrition consultant and one of Laurie's volunteers, hauled her horse-weighing equipment to the rehabilitation farm, located in an unincorporated area west of Miami, and parked next to the barn. She weighed two mares (one was pregnant), two totally untrained yearling fillies, four stallions (soon to be gelded) and the donkey.

"They were in atrocious shape, just bags of bones," said Linda, who documents weight gains as legal evidence in abuse cases.

When Linda weighed the horses eight weeks later, they had all gained 20 to 25 percent of their original weight. According to Linda, these are dramatic figures, but improvements of this kind in such a short period of time are not unusual.

"I've seen horses gain at this rate on our feed before. I have one customer who switched from feeding four bags per week of another feed to Seminole Feed and found he was able to cut back to only a bag and a half, and they are still gaining weight," said Linda.

Nutritionists and veterinarians agree, it's the quality that makes the difference in getting them back on their feet.

The SPCA team begins the recovery program with a half-quart of Seminole's Blue Ribbon 14 three to four times a day. Every third day, the amount is increased gradually by a half quart. They also each get a small alfalfa flake, and after one week, free-choice hay.

"We use Blue Ribbon 14 because it is high in fat and protein," Laurie said.

Seminole sponsors the South Florida SPCA, sending them feed every week, which is delivered free of charge by Finish Line Feed in Dania.

"People from all over the state have adopted our horses," Laurie said. "We survive thanks to Seminole and our volunteers who bathe, clean and even feed on their lunch hour when needed. We get some small donations, but our spring golf tournament is the main fundraiser," she added.

Watching horses get their spirit back, then placing them in perfect homes are Laurie's paybacks. "I love to watch them be horses," she said. "My favorite part is letting them out and watching them run and buck and kick in our 30-acre field. You can hear their hooves thundering all over."

Freelance writer Georgia Brown lives in Bradenton, Florida. She is an avid history buff and horse lover.

The South Florida SPCA is appointed by the courts to investigate cruelty charges pertaining to livestock (mostly horses & ponies) and impounds them during legal proceedings. After ownership is relinquished, the SPCA finds foster homes for them. Once you adopt a horse, you must agree never to sell or trade the animal and to notify the SPCA if you are unable to continue caring for it.

To report a suspected case of abuse in Dade or Broward Counties call 305-825-8826 or your local law enforcement office.

Visit www.spca-sofla.org to see photographs of the facility and the horses that are currently available to adopt. Donations can be sent to South Florida SPCA, 15476 NW 77 Court, # 440, Miami Lakes, Florida 33016. Telephone: 305-825-8826. Fax: 305-463-2360.

The South Florida SPCA's 2004 Par for the Horse golf tournament fundraiser will be held in early March.