

Horse sense becomes a very personal mission for North Fort Myers woman

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Pair pours heart and soul into rescue business.



Tina Garrett and some of her 'babies'

Day 8

The holidays are a time for giving, and the needs in Southwest Florida are great. Each day until Dec. 23, The News-Press will feature the wishes of 12 families and people in hopes that neighbors can help their less fortunate neighbors.

The first time Tina Garrett saw him, she fought back tears. His piano-key ribs were covered with patchy ivory fur; his dark eyes sunken and dull.

But, as she always does, Garrett took a deep breath and stepped forward, one hand stretched toward the starving horse.

That's how she and Matt Venaleck operate, and their unwavering resolve has saved more than 50 horses in the past two years, horses like the skinny gelding who's now sleek and happy, living the high life with his adoptive family. And if saving throwaway equine lives has consumed their money, their spare time and most of their five North Fort Myers acres, so what? They can't imagine doing anything else.

Both FedEx drivers, both born somewhere else (she in North Carolina, he in Michigan), the two have worked their SW Fla Horse Rescue deep into the fabric of the region's horse community.

"They do great work," says William Cross, a board member of the Lee County Posse Arena, which hosts rodeos and equestrian competitions for kids. "It'd be good if more people knew about it and could help."

Asking for help doesn't come easy to the scrappy, self-reliant Garrett, who fell in love with her first horse — a pony, actually — at one of the many foster homes she passed through as a child.

"His name was Chubby Checkers," she recalls. "Once the foster parents realized I had a special way with Chubby, I was allowed to ride him and that I did, all over the place. He filled my days with pure joy, and when I was with him, I didn't have to think about any bad in life. He was my best friend."

She lost him when she moved next, but the life-changing passion remained. Garrett is now a firm believer in the healing power of horses, and she tries to share it however she can.

"I believe if folks get their kids involved in horses at a young age — even if not to own a horse, but to be able to be a part of the equine world — they grow up differently," she says. "I know from my experience: A kid who is into horses is not into jail."

She and Venaleck welcome volunteers and visitors to the rescue, even if it is their home. "Bring the kids, bring your carrots, bring your camera — come on out and see what we do," she says.

What they do ranges from round-the-clock nursing to sponge baths to gently re-acustoming abused horses to human touch. The goal is to make them well enough so they can be adopted to a "forever home." Garrett and Venaleck carefully vet potential adopters, who pay a \$300 fee, to make sure they're able to care for them properly.

“We don’t want our babies to wind up in the same situation,” she says.

Especially because the horses keep coming.

“The need for a horse rescue in our area was much greater than either of us expected,” Garrett says, “and soon we were overwhelmed with horses who desperately needed us.”

They come in a variety of ways: from owners struggling with bankruptcy or foreclosure, from animal hoarders, or after being found by deputies wandering and abandoned. Help comes in a variety of ways too, though there’s never enough, Garrett says.

They hold barn sales and auctions; the local band, Blue Mason Barter Company plays benefits; other area horse-owners serve as foster homes and feed stores, farriers and veterinarians sometimes pitch in too. What would they like for Christmas? Garrett laughs.

“Pretty much anything horse-related — feed, hay, supplies. Businesses can donate things we can raffle off or people can send money,” she says. “I don’t like to stand with my hand out, but we can use all the help we can get.”

They’ve investigated getting nonprofit status, and someday, maybe they will, but for now, things are so tight Garrett can’t justify spending the money on legal and filing fees that could go to needy horses, she says.