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ENTERTAINMENT

Lincoln rescue gives new life to senior horses, hosts area's biggest tack sale

BY HANNAH DARDEN

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Aging horses spend time together at Horses' Honor retirement farm in Lincoln. HANNAH DARDEN



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LINCOLN

Nestled in the golden foothills of the Sierra Nevada, down a long one-lane road and tucked into a tall hillside is a retirement home unlike any other.

This one cares for retired horses, mostly seniors, some saved from slaughterhouses, some former racehorses. Some come from good homes that just couldn't care for them any longer. All of them now have a home for life.

Niña Thompson runs Horses' Honor, the nonprofit organization and sanctuary. Thompson lives on the ranch outside Lincoln with her husband, Eric, and spends her

days caring for senior horses. She used to rescue horses and find them new owners. She estimates she placed about 500 horses in new homes before she decided to keep them for good.

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“My heart was increasingly called to the elders,” Thompson said. “They gave their lifetimes to man to be discarded, sent to slaughter. We became an advocate for senior horses, and we decided that to keep them for life is the responsible thing to do.”

Many of the rescue’s horses came from extraordinary circumstances. Ruby, a mustang, is 40 years old, more than 10 years past most horses’ life expectancy.

Brushwood, an Arabian, completed the Tevis Cup — one of the most difficult endurance races in the country — three times.

Cassandra, a thoroughbred, was rescued from a Mexican rodeo, where she served as a “tripping horse” in an event where she was run down an arena and purposefully tripped with rope.

They’re all healthy now, and will live the rest of their days at Horses’ Honor. The rescue can handle about 25 horses at a time, and is currently full. Thompson said they are only able to accept one or two horses per year, but encouraged horse owners to reach out if they’re struggling to care for their horse.

“If we can’t take them in, we can still help,” Thompson said.

Horses' Honor hosts Northern California's largest tack sale every year in Auburn to raise money for the rescue, selling saddles, bridles, blankets and other horse-related equipment and goodies. Thompson said their biggest expenses every year are feed and medical care for the horses, and the tack sale helps cover those expenses.

Thompson said the sale is "like a department store" once it's open. It takes 30 volunteers a full week to set it up.

This year, the sale will be Nov. 3 and 4 in the Sierra Building at the Gold Country Fairgrounds in Auburn.

Thompson said she sells brand-new equipment, still with tags, for half price at the sale. Anything used goes for even less.

Thompson said she is "extremely grateful" to volunteers, tack sale attendees, and to those who donate tack to be sold at the sale. Weeks ahead of the sale, several stalls in the Horses' Honor barn were filled to the brim with organized and stacked donations, and an even larger pile waited in the barn aisle to be cleaned and organized — several hundred donations in total.

The tack sale helps Horses' Honor to maintain the ranch they've been at for seven years. They also get some help with their feed bill by selling donated tack year-round at Echo Valley Ranch Feeds in Auburn. All the proceeds from those sales are applied directly to the ranch's bill at the feed store, where Niña buys senior feed.

The ranch belongs to Thompson's husband Eric, who she said works "endless unpaid hours and helps me every single day."

After they married, Horses' Honor moved to Eric's ranch and has been there ever since. Before the ranch, Thompson operated the rescue by using donated paddocks at ranches spread all around the Auburn area. Thompson would start at about 6 a.m. and drive around to take care of all the horses.

"It took all day to take care of the horses, but it was the only way to make a rescue work without a ranch," Thompson said. "All that hard work has culminated in the beautiful picture you see here (at the ranch)... all those years of hard work created this."

The ranch has several large pastures for the horses, who live in herds. There's a huge pond, lush grass, tall oak trees and 24/7 care. The Thompsons are planning upgrades as well — more rain and shade cover for the horses, solar panels, and new feeders and waterers.

The 15th annual Horses' Honor Tack Sale will take place from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Nov. 3 and 4 in the Sierra Building at the Gold Country Fairgrounds in Auburn. To get into the sale Saturday, there is a \$5 donation at the door. Shoppers aren't required to make a donation to shop Sunday.

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