

CHARITY SPOTLIGHT



THIS OLD
HORSE

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This Old Horse, founded in 2012 by Nancy Turner at Wishbone Ranch in Minnesota, has already assisted dozens of retired, injured or neglected horses of 30 different breeds.

A CLOSER LOOK AT: **This Old Horse**

Founder Nancy Turner rescues neglected, injured and retired horses at her Minnesota sanctuary, but the organization also benefits human members of the community.

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PHOTOGRAPHY



Currently 40 horses call Wishbone Ranch, where nonprofit organization This Old Horse is based, home. Another 60 are in foster care.

How much are old horses worth? If you ask Nancy Turner, she'll say they're priceless.

Wishbone Ranch, home of the nonprofit rescue and sanctuary This Old Horse in Hastings, Minn., offers respite for unwanted, injured and retired horses. Those equines then serve as ambassadors for the positive effect of horses in people's lives.

"These horses owe us nothing," said Turner, founder and president of This Old Horse. "The mission here is to honor [them] for the work they've done."

Turner founded This Old Horse in April 2012 after volunteering for a therapeutic riding program. Some of the horses that had been donated for the program couldn't continue working, but Turner quickly realized they had plenty of value.

"It's pretty rigorous working with unbalanced riders, for the horse," said Turner, 60. "They were retiring two I'd worked with in my volunteering, and I was shocked by how wonderful they

were. I ended up taking in four of them, and my mom was 82 at the time and terrified of horses. One of these horses connected with her, and we got her on. My mom is now 88, and she rides every week—walk, trot and canter."

Though Turner tried to convince the people at that organization to start something like This Old Horse, they declined, so she decided to do it on her own—though she admitted her initial business plan didn't make it seem possible. But she soon realized she'd have plenty of support.

"It can't be down to math. It has to be down to love. Instead of forming a place, you form a community," said Turner, who added that she just signed up her 1,000th volunteer. "You say, 'Does anyone else think this is a good idea, and can you help?' It's changed the focus of it. Barns have cultures—some are show barns, or some have teenagers and cliques—and the culture of our barn is just to be welcoming. It feels more, not in a religious sense, like a church."

This Old Horse currently has 40 horses at its main campus, 60 in a foster program and an additional 100 on a wait list. Horses arrive at Wishbone Ranch due a variety of situations, though it's often because their owners can no longer care for them due to financial hardship. Other horses find themselves in need of a new home because, due to injury or age, they no longer suit an owner's desire for showing or racing.

Turner, her staff and volunteers light up talking about their experiences working at Wishbone Ranch. They've witnessed and contributed to countless unforgettable transformations where horses arrive starving, injured or anxious, and then they slowly begin trusting people and enjoying life again.

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Big (left) and Gigi, both former race horses and descendants of Triple Crown winners Secretariat and Seattle Slew, respectively, became fast friends when turned out together at Wishbone Ranch.

“People go, ‘Where are your rescue horses?’ And I go, ‘Those fat ones there.’ We can tell our story only so far, but you go look at the horses, and they really tell it,” said Turner.

The group has helped horses of 30 different breeds so far. In November 2016, This Old Horse received an unusual request: to take in seven blind mustang stallions from the rare Gila band in South Dakota.

The International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros couldn’t maintain enough land for their herd of more than 800 animals, and the horses needed homes quickly.

“These seven stallions had formed a social group and were considered virtually un-adoptable,” said Turner. “We were asked, ‘Could This Old Horse take all seven of them?’”

This Old Horse took the seven stallions, plus two mares.

“In the end, it was a simple yes that changed the fate of what we now call

‘The Magnificent Seven,’” said Turner. “They’re almost magical in a way. We had an outdoor with pipe fencing, because we didn’t want them out with electrical fencing getting zapped, and they have figured it out. They’re seven wild blind stallions, and they act like a herd of mares; they’re grouchy to each other, and they pin their ears and eat all day.”

Blind horses require specialized care, and the staff at This Old Horse is raising money for a permanent habitat for the group, with even better fencing and shelter to accommodate their lack of sight.

The horses that can no longer be ridden spend their days grazing and enjoying the company of other horses. If a horse heals from his physical issues, he may be incorporated into the Wishbone Ranch lesson program, which helps raise money for their care. Riders with special needs are welcome, as some instructors are certified by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship. Volunteers at This Old Horse can also earn lessons for helping at the farm.

With its 43 acres, This Old Horse can only accommodate so many equines, so Turner developed the “Pasture Prime Partners” program, where friends of This

Old Horse with safe, high-quality pastures provide summer grazing opportunities for some of the horses that are healthy, retired and relatively uncomplicated. After the horses, still owned by This Old Horse, spend the summer grazing, they return to Wishbone in the fall.

If appropriate for their condition, other horses are placed into foster homes, though This Old Horse retains lifetime ownership of them.

But not only has This Old Horse improved the lives of horses, they’ve also enriched the lives of countless people. The volunteers, donors and staff are part of a close-knit tribe.

One volunteer opportunity is the High Hands Grooming Club, which ensures all horses receive care and affection. The club gathers to groom, pamper and assess the horses in a social environment. Experienced horsemen interested in a weekly fix and beginners who want to learn grooming and groundwork basics are welcome. Working with the Special Olympics Equestrian Team provides another rich volunteer opportunity.

The people who come together at This Old Horse quickly feel the sense of community.

“In the beginning, the catalyst was to love and honor horses,” said Turner. “What sustains us? That there are so many of us that do.”

>> LEARN MORE: Visit This Old Horse online at thisoldhorse.org or check out the group’s Facebook page at facebook.com/ThisOldHorse.

>> GET IN TOUCH: Contact Nancy Turner at info@thisoldhorse.org or (651) 437-1889.

>> GET INVOLVED: You can donate through This Old Horse’s website, and there you can also sign up to volunteer, become a Pasture Prime Partner, fill out a foster application, and purchase logo gear that benefits This Old Horse. See more at thisoldhorse.org/donate.