

After the Finish Line

Finding a New Way to Help Thoroughbreds

BY BILL HELLER

*L*ike many adolescent girls, Dawn Mellen fell in love with horses. She never got over it. More than thirty-five years later, in October, 2007, she launched After the Finish Line, a new non-profit, 501(c)3 organization based in San Diego, California, to help Thoroughbreds transition to new careers after their racing and/or breeding careers are concluded. Donations to ATFL will be distributed to horse rescue organizations around the country through either annual grants every March or emergency funding.

“I knew I wanted to do something,” said the 43-year-old Mellen, who previously worked with more than a dozen horse rescue organizations before starting ATFL.

“She’s a real good person,” Kelly Young, the director of the Lost and Found Horse Rescue Foundation in Pennsylvania said. “She’s made several donations. It’s vital. It’s key to supporting rescues like us so we can take care of the influx of horses.”

Young is extremely hands-on, rescuing horses at auctions before they can be sold to slaughter. Mellen took a different approach.

“I knew I didn’t want to open my own rescue and bring in

horses on my own,” she said. “I wanted to do something on a bigger scale, something that benefits many organizations, not just one. Being involved in horse rescue, you saw that

the common problem for all rescues was lack of funding.”

ATFL didn’t wait long to make an impact, helping the Ohio chapter of CANTER (Communication Alliance to Network Thoroughbred Ex-Racehorses) and the United States Equine Rescue League before the New Year began.

CANTER-Ohio, one of the local chapters of the national organization founded by Joanne Normille, expected funding which never materialized late last fall. CANTER-Ohio

Dawn Mellen



Photograph by Tim Glass

A neglected Clark County Thoroughbred.

Photograph courtesy of United States Equine Rescue League Inc.

Executive Director Chris Colflesh contacted Mellen after receiving an e-mail about ATFL. “I contacted her because we had applied for several grants in the fall that weren’t given,” Colflesh said. “We were pleading for money. I had a couple conversations with her over the phone. She said she didn’t think they’d be able to give us much, but we got a check for \$500, and we’re very grateful for that. The more support we have in the industry, the better off we are. This is another venue for people to support horses.”

In November, Mellen learned of another emergency. Several neglected Thoroughbreds had been discovered on an abandoned farm in Virginia. Mellen learned that the United States Equine Rescue League, a 501(c)3 horse rescue founded in 1997 which protects and rehabilitates horses in North Carolina, Virginia and Indiana, had already acted.

After receiving a neglect report, the USERL contacted the Clark County Sheriff’s Department to investigate a farm in Berryville, Virginia. When authorities arrived, they discovered eight unattended, emaciated Thoroughbreds and a ninth who had died struggling in a ditch. “It was obvious that these were all Thoroughbreds, most with tattoos and some with outgrown racing plates and all with soulful eyes,” horse-owner Gillian Gordon-Moore wrote in an Internet

blog. “These poor creatures were racks of bones covered with rain rot and open sores. Some despicable person was leasing property and was simply letting these young Thoroughbreds die.”

Moore helped with the transportation of the Thoroughbreds to a USERL facility, where they began a long recovery process, one which received a boost when Mellen called Jennifer Heck, the Executive Director of the USERL. “I had dealt with Dawn in the past with other Thoroughbreds,” Heck said. “But I didn’t know she had started this not-profit. So I was very surprised to hear from her that she wanted to help with the horses from Clark County. She called and asked me, ‘How can I help?’ Unfortunately, we don’t get many calls like that. Honestly, we’re always looking for help.”

Mellen sent the USERL a check from ATFL’s emergency fund. She hopes that’s the tip of the iceberg. She hopes to help more horses and more organizations. “I know we’re going to move ahead,” she said. “I know we’re going to work hard.”

She traces her love of horses to her childhood in Trumbull, Connecticut. “I rode horses from the time I was five,” she said. “From a very young age, I just have this attraction for



Photograph by Tim Glass

“Dawn left corporate America to follow her lifelong passion - horses.”

them. I used to ride ponies at Playland and Riverdale, then I took lessons. Then I rode and started riding hunters and jumpers. I didn't compete. I did it for pleasure.”

Her life with horses wasn't preordained, though her mom, Valerie, rode for many years, and her dad, Michael, once owned a harness horse. The family business was tires not equines. Her dad and her uncle began a retail tire business and now have 70 stores throughout New England. Eventually, though, the Mellens would race and breed Thoroughbreds in California after their daughter moved there.

After graduating from the University of Rhode Island with a B.A. in business administration, Mellen worked in her family's company doing real estate and property management, and, eventually, marketing and advertising in her 10-year tenure.

She left to become a financial assistant to two different major brokerage firms, one in Connecticut and one in California, where she re-located in August, 2002. “My sister, Lori, has three small children in Connecticut,” Mellen said. “I didn't want to leave them until they knew me and would remember me. Now, they always come to visit. And we e-mail and talk on the phone. They're 12, 10 and six.”

In San Diego, Mellen left corporate America to follow her life-long passion: horses. “I veered off the path of following a career arc,” she said. “I wasn't looking to climb up the corporate ladder. What was more important to me was not meeting someone else's deadlines, but following my

own goals and desires in my life. That centered on horses.”

She took part-time jobs doing marketing for the Del Mar National Horse Show and working at Del Mar Racetrack in customer service.

She also owns 10 horses with her family, which uses the stable name of Branjam, taken from the names of her nephew Brandon and her niece Jamie. The stable has named several of their new horses for her other niece, Ashley.

Like many others, Mellen was shocked to find out that many Thoroughbreds, including Hall of Famer Exceller and 1986 Kentucky Derby winner and 1987 Horse of the Year Ferdinand, wound up slaughtered for human consumption overseas. Then she learned that Thoroughbreds and other breeds were being slaughtered daily at three United States plants, two in Texas and one in Illinois, and then sent overseas for human consumption. Those three killing plants were shuttered last year.

“I saw a small ad in the Daily Racing Form in 2002,” Mellen said. “I went home from the racetrack that day and I went on my computer to see what it was all about. That's when I learned what happens to many of these racehorses when they're done racing. I loved horses all my life. I never knew what happens to them and that there were rescues to save them.”



Photograph by Tim Glass



It didn't take her long to act.

California has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to taking care of all horses, including Thoroughbreds. Most recently, the California Horse Racing Board last December amended its rules to direct 0.3 percent of all net purses for deposit into a California Retirement Management Account for the benefit of California Thoroughbred retirement and rehabilitation facilities, though horse owners can opt out of the voluntary program. That decisive action celebrated a decade of anti-slaughter legislation in California.

In 1997, California voters overwhelmingly passed a state-wide referendum to ban horse slaughter and transportation to horse slaughter facilities in other states or countries. No other state has voted on the issue, and the federal American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act presently before Congress would mitigate the need to have other states act individually and end once and for all the slaughter of horses in the United States for human consumption overseas.

Opponents of the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act, which shockingly include the two principal veterinary associations in the U.S., the American Association of Equine Practitioners and the American Veterinary Medical Association, rationalize the resumption of horse slaughter in America by arguing that without slaughter, horses would have an even worse fate through neglect and abandonment. In the real world, there is no hellish fate worse for a horse than being overloaded into double-deck trailers designed for cattle and being hauled thousands of miles to meet a grisly death by a stun gun which was also designed for cattle. Cattle have a different neck length and skull shape than horses, virtually guaranteeing that poorly-paid slaughterhouse

workers won't always be successful killing a horse in one shot. It's hard to imagine the agony and suffering of those poor horses unlucky enough to not die with the first shot.

Regardless, California is a living example of what life would be like without slaughter as an option. The simple truth is that in 10 years, the number of abuse and neglect cases for horses has declined in California.

Even if there are unwanted horses that nobody can adequately care for in a future without horse slaughter, those horses can at least be put down humanely by euthanasia, rather than by the savage stun gun in a slaughterhouse.

After the Finish Line is focused on saving horses' lives by helping those organizations which rescue and rehabilitate horses for second careers after racing. There are some 500 horse rescues nationally, and new ones seem to pop up every week.

After the Finish Line will help as many of them as possible, supplementing two national organizations which already deliver financial aid to many rescues, Thoroughbred Charities of America and Blue Horse Charities. In doing so, Mellen will be true to herself. Asked why she fell in love with horses as a child, she answered, "It's something that captures your eye and you can't turn away from it."

She never did.



With the author's grateful appreciation, Dawn Mellen named her organization after Bill Heller's 2003 book, "After the Finish Line, the Race to End Horse Slaughter in America." After the Finish Line's website is www.afterthefinish-line.org.