

Lending a hand: Rescue offers assistance to horse owners in trying times



SEPTEMBER 07, 2011 9:17 PM • [BY PERRY BACKUS - RAVALLI REPUBLIC](#)

CORVALLIS - Three years ago this month, Shannon Alexander received an email that would forever change her life.

Someone from Missoula wanted her to know that two horses were about to lose their home. That person wondered if she might be willing to take the horses for a spell and maybe help them find a new place to live.

She did just that.

Since then, Alexander and a core group of volunteers formed Western Montana Equine Rescue and Rehabilitation, which has helped find new homes for close to 150 horses and almost three dozen donkeys.

That first email opened up a world that Alexander didn't even know existed in the Bitterroot Valley.

She discovered that there were many who quietly stepped forward to offer assistance to people whose lives got in the way of their ability to care for their horses.

"Right out of the gate, I became aware that there were people around here who have been doing this kind of thing for years," Alexander said. "I found out that a lot of my friends were already helping out their neighbors with their horses when times got rough.

"They weren't affiliated with any organization. They did it because they wanted to. They just wanted to take care of horses and help people."

And last winter, when a large animal sanctuary near Hot Springs suddenly folded, the volunteers of Western Montana Equine Rescue were among the first to offer their assistance with finding new homes for more than 100 horses and donkeys.

"It was a huge effort by lots and lots of volunteers and organizations," Alexander said. "I felt really honored for us to be included."

But the need didn't stop when the last of those animals found a new home.

"We try to help out in a lot of different ways," Alexander said. "Sometimes people just need some temporary help or a little education on horse care."

In some cases, the loose-knit group has donated hay to horse owners struggling to make ends meet. In other cases, they've offered farrier work or some help with training. They also have access to some grants to help pay for euthanasia.

"Some horses do need to be put down," Alexander said. "Owners sometimes have a hard time doing that. They may have had that horse for a long time or maybe they just don't have the money."

Whenever possible, Alexander said the group looks to find new homes for horses whose owners can no longer care for them.

"We make home visits and require people wanting to adopt to fill out an application," she said. "We always want to make sure a horse is going to the right person."

As of Wednesday afternoon, the rescue organization had 12 horses that needed a home.

Several live at Alexander's place just off Willow Creek Road, east of Corvallis.

There's Dexter, the 6-year-old quarterhorse that had a mishap with its former owners and ended up needing some rehabilitation work before he was ready for a new home.

"He loves attention," Alexander said, as Dexter leans over the fence for a pat. "He loves people. He loves to be ridden."

In another nearby pen, Alexander introduces Penny, a registered quarterhorse that once competed in the 4-H Western Pleasure class.

A bad experience after being tied to a moveable object left Penny frightened of similar situations.

"She had a horrible incident," Alexander said. "She was tied to something that broke and it beat her up. She had a violent reaction to that incident and she was on guard at all times."

For a year, Alexander just let her be.

"We had to gain her trust back," she said. "We saddle her up now and she's just wonderful."

Penny still doesn't like to be tied tight to anything.

"We accept that horses are as they are because of past experiences," Alexander said. "That's why we try to get to know as much about a horse as we can before it's adopted."

"Everyone is looking for a bomb-proof horse, but there really is no such thing," she said. "There are horses that aren't as reactive as others."

Alexander should know.

Her mother was a horse trainer. Alexander can't remember a time when she was around horses. By the time she was 3, she was riding. At 15, she was training horses and riders.

And so her love for horses runs deep.

That's what she found with the six other board members who stepped forward to create the horse rescue and rehabilitation organization in the Bitterroot.

"We don't have any members. No one is paid. All the money that we raise goes toward the care of horses. Everyone on our board is on the same page."

"We do this because we love horses," Alexander said.

There's room for others who might help further the cause.

"If there are people out there who care about horses, we can use their help," she said. "They don't have to be a super-knowledgeable horse person to help."

It might be that someone has 10 acres of grass they could let some displaced horses graze on for a time. Or maybe someone has good organizational or fundraising skills. There's always a need for volunteers to work directly with the animals.

If people are interested in helping out, they can contact Alexander at 406-360-8473 or by email at info@westernmontanaequinerescue.org.