

# Louisiana Horse Rescue Association's mission: A good home for every horse



Advocate Photo by VERONICA DOMINACH-- Caretaker Solomon Correa walks rescue horse Majestic Evening at Elite Thoroughbreds in Folsom on Tuesday, Feb. 10, 2015.

**By Anne Lang**

*Special to The Advocate*

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The horrific images from January 2012 are forever burned in Michele Rodriguez's mind.

Rodriguez, cofounder of the Louisiana Horse Rescue Association, was acting on a call she had received from an animal shelter in Sabine Parish. Nearly 50 starving horses had been seized from a private farm by the local sheriff's department, but the animal shelter had no room to house that many large animals.

So Rodriguez rounded up as many friends with horse trailers as she could, and the convoy headed for the farm.

Nothing could have prepared them for what they saw.

"The place was littered with old bones, as well as fresh carcasses," Rodriguez said. "There were dead horses and dead dogs. At one time, there had been 90 horses at that farm. We rescued 45, which means the owner killed 45 horses."

"Vets from LSU came with us to implant ID chips and pull Coggins (a blood test for equine infectious anemia) on all the horses. It took us two days to get them all off the property. The cost completely depleted the LHRA coffers."

Most of the rescued horses went back to Rodriguez's farm in Folsom or to the Forest Hills farm of LHRA president Patrick Richmond. Others were taken in by farm-owning friends.

Eventually, many of the horses recovered enough to be offered as potential adoptees from the nonprofit LHRA, which aims to provide sanctuary for abused or abandoned thoroughbreds. Once in the care of LHRA, horses are rehabilitated or repurposed as the organization finds caring homes for them.

LHRA also aims to increase awareness about thoroughbreds in need of rescue following their racing or breeding careers, and it raises funds to support the intake of horses that the organization cannot directly place.

On a recent sunny morning in Folsom, three years after the Sabine Parish rescue, the energetic Rodriguez was in full multitask mode at the 100-acre Elite Thoroughbreds — owned with her husband, Lee D. Thomas, a full-time attorney. (Rodriguez uses her own law degree to handle real-estate closings for one of the couple's businesses but devotes the majority of her time to overseeing farm operations and the LHRA.)

At 11 a.m., Rodriguez had just finished showing two of the farm's stallions to a client who has sent his broodmares to Elite for breeding in the past. During a subsequent interview, Rodriguez juggled a few incoming calls from other clients and staff. Then she deftly loaded a horse onto a trailer and drove a few miles to the family's second farm on 600 acres — home to Elite's 30 broodmares, a few dozen outside broodmares, numerous foals and LHRA horses.

The smaller farm is where Elite's eight active stallions live and where young racing prospects (most of them homebreds) are trained by the couple's son Lee, 30, on an oval track. Son Reece, 28, recently obtained his training license and is assisting Lee to gain experience before someday branching off on his own. Elite Thoroughbreds currently has about 35 horses racing at various Louisiana tracks, and many of those horses are from the LHRA herd — which sometimes pays off for the organization.

"When we register a horse listing LHRA as the breeder and that horse does well on the track, the program benefits from the resulting Louisiana breeders' awards," Rodriguez said. "And we've had quite a few that have done well."



Both farms are laid out on gently rolling hills and are postcard-picture perfect. After conducting a tour of the immaculate stables at the broodmare/rescue farm, Rodriguez loaded three horses in the trailer for a trip back to the training farm. One of those horses was a rescued thoroughbred that later in the day would go to a new home (and a new career as a non-racing sport horse) with a teenage girl in Vinton.

Rodríguez can relate to horse-loving girls, having owned a Quarter Horse mare from the time she was 12.

“The barn where we boarded her was where I met my first thoroughbred people, who raced horses at Jefferson Downs,” Rodriguez said.

Her foray into horse-rescue efforts began later, in the mid-1980s, when someone at that boarding barn alerted her to a pregnant mare and another mare with a foal — all of whom had suffered abuse and neglect elsewhere in the community. Rodriguez took in all three.

When the pregnant mare gave birth, Rodriguez decided to try the resulting foal as a racehorse.

“That colt never made it to the track,” Rodriguez said. “But he did become the first horse I sent off to be trained, and that’s how I started to meet people in the thoroughbred industry. I still have that horse; he’s about 25 years old now.”

Rodriguez cofounded LHRA in 2007 with Therese Arroyo, who serves on the six-member LHRA board and is the organization’s bookkeeper. Since its creation, LHRA has rescued about 175 thoroughbreds and placed about 150.

Some rescued horses are simply too old or too injured to re-home — and a few come from such deplorable situations that their lives can’t be saved by LHRA. Along with the potential adoptees, those horses are equally divided between Rodriguez’s farm in Folsom and Richmond’s farm near Alexandria.

Rodriguez said the average number of rescue horses in residence at any given time is 30 to 35 but added that the horses are placed in new homes at a fairly steady rate. Donations of horses often come from racehorse owners who contact LHRA through their trainers, Rodriguez said.

“Many of them write a hefty check to send along with the horse if they know we’re going to have it for a while, such as if it needs a long time to recover from injuries,” she said.

Other LHRA horses come from humane removals (including 47 severely malnourished horses from a farm in Natchitoches Parish) or from animal control departments in Louisiana parishes. Others come from “killer” auctions — where

horses are frequently sold to buyers, who then transport them to Mexico for slaughter.

LHRA's first rescue under the latter circumstance occurred in October 2006, when the organization was just getting off the ground. Rodriguez heard of five perfectly sound mares, all ex-racehorses, that were headed for a killer sale. She went to the auction and bought them all for less than \$300 each.

One of the rescued mares, Majestic Evening, was pregnant. LHRA sold the resulting foal to Louisiana trainer David Banks (who died in December) for \$10,000. The colt, named Majestic Knight, won more than \$23,000 in four starts before retiring with a bowed tendon.

By now, having recovered enough for very light riding, David's widow, Allison, said Majestic Knight is scheduled to be evaluated as a potential horse for the nonprofit Acadiana Therapeutic Riding Organization in Lafayette, which provides riding opportunities for individuals with physical, emotional or learning disabilities.

After their purchase of Majestic Knight, David and Allison bought several more LHRA horses, much to the gratitude of the LHRA board. Of Rodriguez, Allison said: "Michele has the biggest heart and is 100 percent for the rescue program and good of all those horses. I wish we had more people like her in the racing industry, because I see horses every day at the training center (in Carencro) that need new homes."

Thoroughbreds that go on to new careers have proved to be highly suitable for numerous activities, such as show jumping, foxhunting, polo, trail riding, dressage and three-day eventing. But rescue organizations like LHRA are always in need of capable riders who can train former racehorses or unraced colts and fillies to perform new tasks under saddle.

"Most people don't want to take on a thoroughbred that they have to work with from scratch," Rodriguez said.

She said she hopes to be able to hire a local horseman to help out in that regard, but since 100 percent of donations to LHRA go into feed, housing and veterinary care for the horses, it's often tough to squeeze out extra funds for related purposes — even though having some saddle-ready candidates to offer would boost the adoption rate.

Rodriguez has other goals for the program. She and the board would like to set up a system with Louisiana racetracks where owners would allocate \$10 per start to go toward LHRA, a program that Rodriguez said already exists in Illinois.

Toward that end, Rodriguez said the board is looking at presenting an opt-out clause to the state legislature.



"If it's an opt-in choice to donate the \$10 per start, owners usually aren't going to do it," she said. "It has to be an opt-out clause to be effective."

The LHRA also is pursuing various grant avenues, and "we'd eventually like to have enough money coming in to be able to pay a full-time executive director to run the program," she said.

Over the years, fundraisers have provided a big boost to LHRA. The next event is a pig roast slated for March 16 at the Fair Grounds. In the past, LHRA has benefited from other types of fundraisers, such as casino nights and crawfish boils. Currently, LHRA volunteers are organizing a spring golf tournament.

Despite the challenges of keeping the nonprofit afloat, Rodriguez said she stays motivated by the rewarding aspects of the job — which for her is a labor of love.

"I like knowing that we're saving a lot of horses from starvation," she said. "It's always exciting to see them starting to come around and getting healthier after just a few weeks on the farm. Also, it's gratifying to know that we're giving them a chance for another life — to go and do another job that they can enjoy."

Like a proud parent, Rodriguez follows the careers of LHRA-bred racehorses.

"Even if the horse is claimed off me, I know most of the trainers, so I'll tell them: 'When this horse is done racing, make sure you call me so I can get the horse back and put it in a good home,'" she said. "And eventually, they do call me."

"Even if I have to pay an owner \$500 or \$1,000 to buy the horse back, I'll do it because it's worth it to me to give that horse a good home. It gives me peace of mind to know that I've done the best I can for one of my babies."

Sidebar



# Rosie Napravnik shares LHRA's passion for caring for horses

By Anne Lang

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Nationally renowned jockey Rosie Napravnik shares Michele Rodriguez's desire for finding new jobs and homes for off-the-track thoroughbreds.

Nappravnik is on the board of Old Friends, a Kentucky-based retirement facility for retired thoroughbreds. And when time allows, she speaks publicly for the cause of repurposing retired racehorses.

Nappravnik — who retired from racing in October after becoming pregnant, with the baby expected to arrive in June — recently was named to the board of the Retired Racehorse Project, which helps find new homes and careers for former racehorses.

On a winter morning at the Fair Grounds, where she assists her husband, trainer Joe Sharp, in the care of their racing stable's horses, Nappravnik talked about one particular thoroughbred whose career she had followed ever since winning two races on him during his years of running primarily in claiming races across the country, from 2003-08.

The horse campaigned under the name Old Ironsides, whose sire was multiple-graded stakes winner Rubiano. Nappravnik took a special liking to the gelding, so "I kept track of him through the years," she said. "Even when he was claimed a few times and moved out of state, I stayed in touch with the owners. That's how I got him in 2008 when he retired (at age 7)."

From the day she acquired him, "Sugar" became part of Nappravnik's family. She taught him to jump, which led to competitions in one-day eventing and hunter/jumper classes, as well as romps in the foxhunting field. Now 14, Sugar has embraced his current role as a pony horse for Sharp's stable, Nappravnik said.

Sugar isn't the only off-the-track thoroughbred that Nappravnik has helped find a new career.

"There have been a few I've handpicked myself that I'd ridden in races," she said.

Nappravnik also has sent former racehorses to her mother, Cindy Faherty Nappravnik, who teaches riding on the East Coast.

“It really makes me feel good when I hear that these horses have gone on to do something awesome and that they love their new jobs,” Napravnik said. “I’m really passionate about this, because I know these horses’ potential.”

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