

THE CRUSADERS



At Brighter Days Horse Refuge, Jeannie and Bill Weatherholtz rescue and rehabilitate equine victims of human abuse.



"I've only gone out on a couple of rescue calls, and each time I was shocked," says Brighter Days' volunteer coordinator Marilyn Short. "I don't know how Jeannie and Bill (shown at right) deal with it all the time."



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JEANNIE WEATHERHOLTZ still shudders when she recalls "the most horrendous scene" ever encountered in her life, which for the last 10 years has been devoted to rescuing abused horses. The year was 1987. The place was a rural town outside of San Antonio, Texas, where 36 severely malnourished horses and ponies had been discovered on the property of an elderly man. Acting on a court order, Jeannie and her band of volunteer rescuers had arrived to remove the starving animals. As they piled out of the truck, the farm seemed eerily deserted, with nary a horse in sight.

Jeannie walked over to one of the dilapidated structures, and peered inside. Adjusting her vision to the gloom, she saw a dozen pairs of little eyes staring back at her over half-doors. Ponies, she realized—but how were they able to raise their heads so high? A glance into the nearest stall provided her answer. The ponies were standing on more than 3 feet of reeking, solid waste. "Every shed on the site was like that," Jeannie remembers. "All were filthy, and all held horses or ponies that hadn't seen the light of day for months, maybe even years. Some were locked inside a windowless metal trailer, crammed together like sardines. All the ponies' feet were so long they were curling backward, like rams' horns.

"We'd gotten there none too soon."



That grim South Texas scene wasn't Jeannie's first exposure to the horrors of equine abuse. Just prior to that seizure, she and her husband, Bill, had incorporated their year-old rescue operation. Based on 110 leased acres in Boerne (a ranching community northwest of San Antonio), the Brighter Days Horse Refuge already had been serving as a safe haven for dozens of equine "throwaways."

Jeannie's and Bill's respective early years didn't directly prepare them for their mission. Neither one had a horse background—not Jeannie in her native England, nor Bill in his native Virginia. But like countless children before her, Jeannie had fallen in love with the book *Black Beauty*.

"That story made a big impact on me," she says. "I'd always hated to see cruelty dealt to any animal. I knew that I someday wanted a life centered around helping animals, particularly horses." That "someday" would take about 20 years.

After finishing high school in 1955, she met and married Bill, who was serving in Europe with the U.S. Air Force. Over the next 2 decades, the couple raised their 4 children, enduring military transfers between Georgia and Germany.

After retiring in 1975, Bill moved his family to San Antonio, where he worked in a variety of jobs until the youngest child left home. Following a long-harbored wish to live in the country, he and Jeannie moved to Boerne.

At first, Jeannie fulfilled her desire to work with animals by helping a friend who ran a wildlife rescue service. But one fateful day, the local humane society called, looking for someone to take in a gelding who'd been abandoned by his owners. Though she had no experience with horses, Jeannie quickly stepped forward to claim "Nicky."

"He was 2 years old, and starving to death," she says. "I was immediately drawn to him." Eager to learn how to care for her new charge, she introduced herself to Clay Leatherman, who'd lived next door to Nicky. She'd learned that Leatherman had so pitied the gelding, he'd snuck feed to him through the fence.

Jeannie convinced the kind neighbor to move his trailer home onto her property, where he worked as a handyman and taught her the basics of horse care. "Clay was wonderful," Jeannie declares.

Clockwise from top: Jeannie doctors an eye; evidence of TLC; a volunteer comforts a resident; Isobella, whose shoulder was broken by her dam.





Prolonging The Golden Years

Neglect and abuse can take their toll on a horse's health. But with intervention and proper care, such horses can regain most, if not all, of their health, and live long, comfortable lives. For those of you interested in—or already caring for—retired/rescued equine senior citizens, Jeannie offers the following longevity tips:

- Take in geriatric horses only if you'll be living on the same property, so you can keep a constant watch. Very old horses are like very old people: they need extra attention, as they can get disoriented, or suddenly become ill.
- Place elderly charges in the pasture closest to your house, for the above reasons. Group them in separate enclosures according to compatibility, to maximize safety and minimize stress. (*Hint:* Ponies and donkeys make excellent companions for geriatric horses, as they're unlikely to battle/compete for dominance/food.)
- Establish a feed/management/exercise schedule—and stick to it. Horses are creatures of habit—even minor changes in schedule can cause them stress.
- When formulating an elderly horse's ration, remember this fact: Your senior citizens' teeth may be worn down, or missing. (Schedule biannual veterinary dental exams, to stay on top of these problems.) Such horses often can't chew hay; some have trouble eating and/or digesting grass. As a primary food source, try feeding complete-feed pellets specially formulated for senior horses. (*Tip:* If your horse has severe dental problems, you can dampen the pellets, which will render them easier for the horse to "gum," swallow, and digest.) Crimped oats and crumpled alfalfa cubes also appeal to elderly palates, especially when flavored with a touch of sweet feed. Work with your veterinarian, to formulate a ration for your horse's specific needs/condition.
- Schedule at least one daily treat or snack time, so your elderly charges will congregate near you. This will give you an extra opportunity to closely check each one's condition.

"If I'd been left to my own devices, I probably would have fed Nicky five times what he needed, inadvertently *hurting* him, rather than helping him."

She'd barely begun to nurse Nicky back to health, when she took in a little red mare that was being abused by a local family. Later that year, Jeannie's charges grew to seven, when her wildlife rescue friend asked her to take five horses that had been removed from a negligent owner. Jeannie remembers that

How to Report Horse Abuse

Your conscience has been bothered by a neighbor you suspect is abusing or neglecting his/her horses. You want to take some kind of action, but you're not sure how to go about it. Here's advice from Bill and Jeannie Weatherholtz:

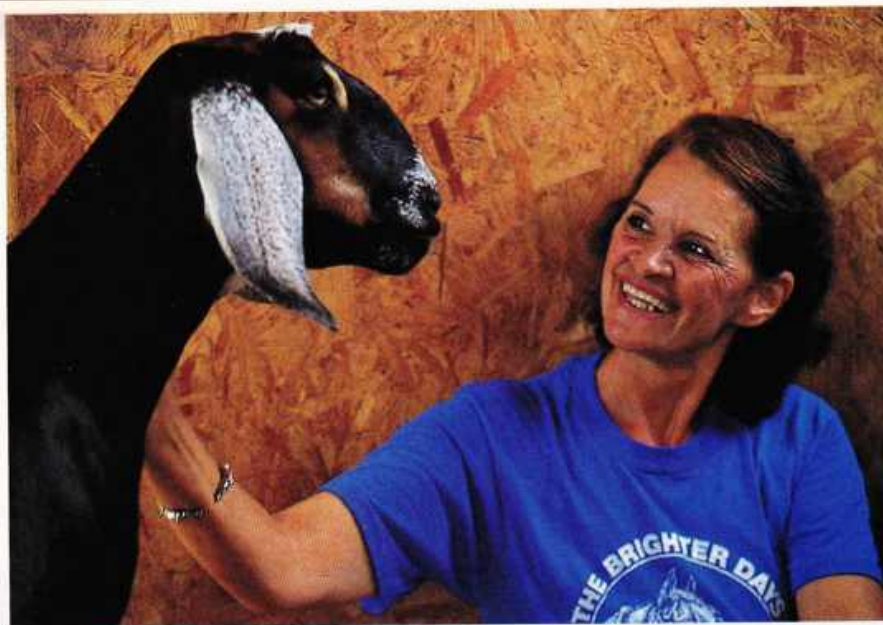
1. Try to obtain the name, address, and phone number of the property owner, as well as the lessee, if any. (For guidance, call your county clerk, under the "Government" section of your *Yellow Pages*.)
2. Try to obtain the name, address, and phone number of the person who owns the horse(s), if it's someone other than the property owner or lessee.
3. Armed with the above information, go in person to the local police or sheriff's department and file a formal, written complaint. Be sure to sign your name: Through experience, Bill and Jeannie say they've learned that anonymous complaints often frustrate law officers. This frustration can cause *your* unsigned complaint to be overlooked.
4. File duplicate complaint copies with your local humane organizations. (Tip: Don't solely rely on an organization like Brighter Days to launch an investigation—they have no authority to act without a court order.)
5. Within 30 days of filing the complaint, place follow-up phone calls, to see if action has been taken.
6. If no investigation has been made by law officials, alert the local media. Sometimes the rumblings of negative publicity will prompt instant action.
7. Resist the urge to take matters into your own hands: it's not only dangerous, but if the owners can prove you've trespassed, you'll lose your case.
8. For more information on reporting abuse, contact: Brighter Days Horse Refuge, (210) 510-6607; American Horse Protection Association, (202) 965-0500; Hooved Animal Humane Society, (815) 337-5563; Humane Connection, Inc., (715) 276-7187.

four of those emaciated horses "kept falling down in the trailer, they were so sick. But after 3 months at our place, they were so sleek and beautiful, you'd hardly recognize them."

That experience marked a turning

Clockwise from top: Jeni the mule; Jeannie with Ollie; Nicky, the first rescue who started it all; a volunteer on "rounds"; Brighter Days' farrier Joe Finnegan.





A Day in the Life...

You may have envisioned doing something like the Weatherholtzes: bringing in stray horses no one else wants, nursing the injured and abused ones back to health, and/or providing a retirement home for old-timers. A glance at Jeannie's typical daily schedule might make you think again:

7:00 A.M.: Prepare and eat breakfast.

8:00 A.M.: Fill grain buckets for about 50 horses/ponies, most of whom require a custom mixture due to individual dietary needs.

8:30 A.M.: Place feed buckets (with help of one volunteer) in each horse's stall/shed; clean/fill water buckets.

9:00 A.M.: Doctor injuries; bottle-feed any orphaned foals; administer medicines; work with newcomers, or special cases.

10:30 A.M.: While volunteer assistant (except on days off) removes feed buckets, grooms horses, and mucks stalls, spend several hours on refuge-related paperwork, etc.

12:30 P.M.: Feed horses that require midday meal; continue paperwork, etc.

2:30 P.M.: Check on all horses; administer vitamin supplements and treats to elderly residents. Repeat 9:00 A.M. doctoring routine.

4:30 P.M.: Repeat 8:00 A.M. feeding/watering routine.

9:00 P.M.: Repeat 9:00 A.M. doctoring routine; make one final round of all the stalls/sheds/pastures.

point for the Weatherholtzes. "I realized that I wanted to start my own rescue service," Jeannie says. "I loved the feeling of accomplishment—of taking a bag of bones and turning it into a fat, happy horse. Or, of nurturing an abused colt to the point that he's no longer frightened to death of people."

Jeannie was off to a running start, having become acquainted with South Texas law enforcement agencies and humane organizations during the year she'd been taking in emergency cases. Incorporating the nonprofit service, then obtaining tax-exempt status, made it all official. Brighter Days was in business.

THE RESCUED

After almost 10 years, Brighter Days' roster of rescuees has swelled to 50. Jeannie's and Bill's four-legged charges come in every shape, size, and color, and from all walks of life: racing, ranching, rodeo, showing, recreational trail. Donkeys, mules, goats—and even a crippled bull—also have found refuge there. All

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have in common their misfortunes at the hands of humans.

Jeannie points out Jeni, the mule who was tied by her owners to a truck bumper and towed, in a misguided attempt to teach her to lead. She fell while being pulled along, breaking her left shoulder—the driver didn't stop, dragging the mule until she'd lost most of the skin on that side. Jeannie rescued Jeni, then successfully battled both the mule's fear, and her raging infection. Today, a misaligned front leg barely slows Jeni's progress through her pasture.

Recent rescues involving Brighter Days include a filly whose flesh had begun to grow around a baling-twine noose embedded in her neck; a colt whose eye was flattened by a well-placed kick from another horse; and a mare whose untreated leg tumor is the size of a watermelon.

Just what type or degree of suffering each horse has previously endured can be a mystery to Jeannie, although sometimes the horses will reveal their own sad tales.

"I once had a Thoroughbred/Appaloosa cross who 'told' me her former owners used to hit her with a feed bucket, because every time I walked into her stall with grain, she'd rear up and scream," Jeannie says. "Another mare would run like the devil every time any man wearing a cowboy hat walked past with a pitchfork full of hay. Others are scared of certain noises. The owners can tell you what they want about these horses' histories, but the horses can tell you a whole lot more."

They apparently communicate with each other as well, Jeannie adds. "We get a lot of horses who are terribly frightened when they arrive, but there seems to be some sort of telepathy between residents and newcomers, because we haven't had one yet who wasn't totally relaxed by the end of his first week."

More than half of Brighter Days' horses are over 20 years old; Jeannie is credited with an extraordinary knack for boosting these abuse-survivors' longevity. Brighter Days' oldest resident is Mabel, estimated to be in her early 40s. Another resident lived to the ripe old age of 42; many are well into their 30s.

"I think it's the extra care Jeannie gives them, and the attention to individual dietary needs that keeps the older horses alive," says Joe Finnegan, Bright-

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er Days' farrier. "Each of these horses is loved like a kid. I've seen Jeannie and Bill do some amazing things with horses that didn't seem to have a chance for any real quality of life." (Jeannie outlines her geriatric care program in "Prolonging The Golden Years," on page 29.)

Dr. Rick Rodenbeck has been Brighter Days' primary veterinarian since 1986. He lauds the Weatherholtzes' steadfast commitment to the horses.

"I've seen a lot of these places start up," says Rodenbeck, "but the owners don't have a realistic view of what all that's involved in caring for these types of horses. People will stay in it for 6 months or a year, then they'll disappear. But Jeannie and Bill have stuck with it for nearly 10 years now. And Jeannie's as enthusiastic and caring toward the horses as she was when she started."

One of Jeannie's talents, Rodenbeck says, is her ability to absorb large amounts of medical information, which is enhanced by an instinct for when to use it. This reduces his need for follow-up visits—and saves on vet bills. (Jeannie estimates that she spends less than \$3,000 a year on such bills.) "She's acquired a lot of expertise; as far as equine nutrition goes, she's as authoritative as anyone I know," he says.

Regarding Jeannie's success with older horses, Rodenbeck says: "It's kind of a sixth sense with her, knowing what a horse needs, and knowing how to comfort him. I've only seen a few people who have that knack. What usually kills horses are low levels of stress, whether it's from their environment, or from pain. But the horses at the refuge aren't at all stressed, because Jeannie's able to comfort them past that point."

THE RESCUE BUSINESS

As Brighter Days has grown, Jeannie's found that her duties have expanded beyond those of nurturing horses. Because the refuge is a *business*—with an annual operating budget of \$65,000—her duties now include a myriad of paperwork and phone calls. She must round up volunteers, follow up on reported abuse and neglect cases, solicit sponsors and donors, screen adoptive owner candidates, organize fund-raisers, schedule the farrier and veterinarian, order feed and supplies, plan the budget, pay bills, compose newsletters, and write thank-you notes. Bill, now 60, also finds that real-world issues can tug him away

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from the horses: He works part time as a school-bus driver, to supplement his military pension.

Still, there are cash-flow problems. These cold business facts often are juggled with the painful emotions generated by the inevitable death of a beloved long-time equine resident. But the Weatherholtzes say the rewards far outweigh the headaches and pain.

"The kindness you bestow on these animals, they give back to you tenfold," says Jeannie, who's now 57. "It's like they're saying: 'I love you, because you've helped me.'"

With Jeannie's care, some young horses are deemed healthy enough for adoption. The \$500 adoption fee (\$300 for a pony, or unrideable adoptee) is funneled back into Brighter Days' operating budget. But the ability to fork up that fee isn't enough to allow you to drive off with a Brighter Days' resident.

You first must pass a stringent multi-day, on-site screening process that Bill half-jokingly says is tougher than those used by human agencies. You then must sign a contract promising that the horse will never be sold, that he'll be returned to the refuge if he's no longer wanted, and that follow-up visits (by Jeannie or one of her volunteers) are allowed.

Further, the refuge retains the right to remove the horse if it's determined that he isn't getting proper care. So far, Jeannie says, that hasn't happened—but a number of adoptees have been voluntarily returned, due to their owners' changing life circumstances.

Donations and sponsorships pay the bulk of Brighter Days' bills. For \$25 to \$50 a month (\$15 to \$25 for ponies), you can sponsor a resident. You'll receive photos of your chosen horse or pony, and a subscription to the refuge's quarterly newsletter. Periodic fund-raisers bring in additional revenue. Television personality and former rodeo all-around cowboy Larry Mahan, a local resident, throws a yearly birthday bash to benefit his four-legged friends at the refuge.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE SAD

Battling the ills of abuse and neglect nurtures the spirit at Brighter Days. But tragedies have tugged at its soul. The last 12 months have been the most challenging in the refuge's history, and in Jeannie's and Bill's lives.

From its original 110 acres, Brighter
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Days had moved in the early 1990s to 10 rented acres, also in Boerne. When that land was sold in October of 1994, Jeannie and Bill were given short notice that they had to move. Securing 20 acres in nearby Pipe Creek—for which they now have a mortgage—they called on every available volunteer, and scrambled to build shelters on the new site, then to transport their equine residents. In the process, budget dollars were stretched tighter than ever, and the program's fiscal recovery has been slow.

This spring, the couple was just recovering from the move, when tragedy struck them at their core. Their youngest daughter, Tina, lost her battle with cancer at the age of 34. A mother of five, she'd been deeply involved with the refuge; Jeannie had hoped Tina might one day take it over from her.

"She dearly loved what we did here," says Jeannie, struggling to control her emotions. "When she died, I thought: 'I can't do this anymore. I've lost my baby.' But I had to remember that Tina would have wanted me to go on, and that was the only thing that kept me going. The horses still needed me. And now I realize, if I hadn't had the horses, what would I have done? They ended up pulling me through."

Still, a black cloud remained over the refuge for a time. Tina's death was followed by those of several equine friends, including a 4-year resident, Mesa. The 26-year-old mare was retired to the refuge from a handicapped riding program. "Mesa was like a mother to all the ponies and donkeys—she loved them like her own," recalls Jeannie. "And she was our 'official greeter' to all new residents, because she was so friendly."

During the last week of her life, the mare had grown so weak that she couldn't lift her head. Jeannie and Bill took stall-sitting shifts around the clock, helping her drink water, rolling her over to lie on one side and then the other, surrounding her with warm blankets and love. When the mare slipped into shock, they knew it was time for euthanasia, and called Rodenbeck.

"Losing horses, especially ones that have been with us for many years, is always hard," says Bill. "You feel so helpless, even when you know you've done everything humanly possible to prolong their lives."

Adds Jeannie: "If I have to spend 24
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hours a day with a sick horse to make him better, I'll do it, because that's what I'm here for—to fight for them. But I also have to let go for them. I know they're ready to die when they don't want to eat any more, they don't want to associate with the world any more, and the light has left their eyes. We never allow any of the animals to suffer. When it's time, they're put to sleep swiftly and painlessly. But it's always hard."

To ease the constant emotional drain, sometimes the Weatherholtzes slip away for awhile. It's not often that Bill manages to separate Jeannie from her "babies," but when the couple does leave, they have some good friends and volunteers they can trust to care for the horses. Those include their full-time volunteer assistant, Mark, who drives in 30 miles from San Antonio, 6 days a week. "Without our volunteers, we'd be sunk," Bill says emphatically.

But sinking, they're not. A palpable spirit of hope and dedication prevails at Brighter Days. One sunny fall day, Jeannie escorts a visitor around the property, where horses and ponies in varying stages of recovery graze or snooze under shade trees. Jeannie's talking about that first big seizure back in '87, the one where starving horses and ponies were found locked in lightless sheds.

She recalls the night after all the animals had been safely delivered to the refuge, when she and Bill sat in lawn chairs, contentedly watching the ponies munching hay. Then it began to rain; the Weatherholtzes quickly herded the ponies toward their shelters. All but one went willingly. The blind pony Cotton-top—who'd never in her young life been outdoors—refused shelter.

"It was starting to rain hard," Jeannie says, "but for the life of us, we couldn't keep little Cottontop in her shed. We'd lead her in, and she'd trot right back out—she was reveling in this new, outside world. We finally gave up and just watched as she stood there, eyes closed and nose in the air, letting the cool rivulets run down her face."

Jeannie and Bill say they'd swear that pony was smiling. □

"That special light in the eyes that Jeannie refers to—it's evident on the face of every horse at the refuge," says Texas freelance writer Anne Lang. "The equine industry sorely needs more places like Brighter Days."