

# Dining with the Horses

FOR THE ANIMALS ...

In the fall of 2008, the dominating story in American newspapers was the economy: companies folding, jobs lost, 401Ks diminished. Inevitably, it quickly became clear that families struggling to feed themselves were unable to care for their horses, and the equine industry saw the incidence of abandoned and starved animals skyrocket. Shelters could take in suffering dogs, cats and other small animals, but who could house the much larger and more costly horses? For many, the end came—and is still coming—on a slaughter truck to Mexico, frightened, hungry, and often in pain.

For Arizona's Healing Hearts Animal Sanctuary, that is unacceptable. Founded to take in abandoned, abused and neglected horses, it was originally designed to work primarily with the Department of Agriculture and other governmental agencies to house horses that have been seized by inspectors. But for the entire state of Arizona, there are only four livestock inspectors. With an estimated 500 horses a week from northern Maricopa County alone bound for slaughter facilities across the border, the situation has become anyone's worst nightmare. Now Healing Hearts works with individuals and other animal welfare associations to rescue animals in need.

At its 54-acre sanctuary in Wilcox, the organization now has the capacity to house 60 horses. Also on hand are dogs, cats, goats, rabbits (nearly any abandoned, abused or neglected animal, although the focus is on horses). At an elevation of 4,200 feet, it enjoys a moderate climate, similar to Sedona. A full-time caretaker lives on the property, assisted by two part-timers and a growing number of volunteers. Horses are not only fed, housed and turned out, but also groomed, petted and played with to maintain the sociability necessary for their welfare.

"We feel like we are in a position to really make a difference through the rescue of these animals and the education of the public," says Betty Welton, president and founder of Healing Hearts.

The organization, which is modeled after the famed Best Friends of Kanab, Utah, has a comprehensive agenda. The urgency of the equine situation in the troubled economy is highest priority now,



*Betty Welton and  
Susan Drescher-Mulzet*



*Susan Drescher-Mulzet and National Champion Astro Man*

but plans call for an expanded program of public education (particularly for children) in animal care and the state of the horse community. Also in the future is a veterinary facility and a full-time veterinarian who can offer low-cost spay and neutering.

Formed in 2005, Healing Hearts has a budget of approximately \$250,000 annually. This supports the program, the caretakers, a marketing representative, and an individual who writes animal profiles for their website, [www.healingheartsaz.org](http://www.healingheartsaz.org). A nine-member board of directors and seven-member advisory board (including three veterinarians) do not take salaries. Nor does Welton, a well-known figure in Arizona animal welfare. In addition to her expertise, her background facilitates the organization's cooperation with governmental agencies and other animal rescue associations in the area to achieve its mission.

"We are a rescue, not a no-kill shelter," says Susan Drescher-Mulzet, Chair of the Healing Hearts Board. "We will provide a forever-home for any animal who is abused, neglected or abandoned. Some of the saddest stories you've ever heard in your life have come across our desk; I try to focus on the good stuff—the fact that these animals are now going to be very well taken care of. Every animal we save, to me, is a miracle."

For horses who are able to make the transition to a new life, adoption is an option, and the Sanctuary works to facilitate that. Not only is it best for the horse and the human who wants it, but it also makes room for the rescue of more horses.

Betty Welton describes some of the animals taken off of slaughter trucks or picked up before that became their future. "A couple of weeks ago, we took four off a truck," she says. "One is a yearling, and the other three are mares under five. They're healthy and beautiful. I feel sorry for the public who think they are doing the right thing when they send their horses to auction. They don't really understand what is happening.

"Then another of our horses is retired from the U.S. Forestry Service. That's mandatory at 14 or 15 years of age, and the government has limited options for that. We've also had a



*Bob Battaglia and Rubie Slippers*



*Russell Vento, Jr., and Bob Battaglia of Battaglia Farms, Susan Drescher-Mulzet and Mark Mulzet*

Border Patrol horse. They were both in good shape." Those two, who meet the needs of the public interested in mounts for children or older people looking for recreation, are the most easily adopted out. Many others are not so easily placed.

"The situation in the horse world is dire," says Welton, "and it doesn't look like it's going to get better any time soon."

To further complicate matters, well-meaning people have set up their own "rescue organizations," only to find that it is more expensive and complicated than they anticipated. Healing Hearts, and other groups like them, have had to rescue animals from these circumstances as well. At present, Welton is working with governmental agencies to develop requirements for licensing as a rescue organizations—fairly minimal, she says, but enough to deter those not able to take on the real burden.

To support their work, Healing Hearts fields three fund-raising efforts. A spring golf tournament and a fall gala with a western theme are annual favorites, and in 2008, the popular "Dining with the Horses" was added. There, guests enjoyed

dinner at Scottsdale's Battaglia Farms, a premier Arabian horse facility, and an exciting parade of champions in many breeds. On deck for the summer of 2009 is an open house at the Wilcox sanctuary, so that donors and the public can get better acquainted with Healing Hearts' achievements.

That is just the beginning. "Nationwide, we want to reach out—work with people and educate children, and make a difference in providing humane care for farm and domestic animals alike," Betty Welton says. "We want to work with other organizations as well, because no one can do it alone."

Susan Drescher-Mulzet voices what many in the Healing Hearts family feel. "In this time of need, with the economy being what it is, it is important to take care of our animals, and it's important to help out," she says. "Human beings need to take care of those who can't speak for themselves."

*Healing Hearts of Arizona, LLC, is a 501(c)(3) corporation, and donations are tax deductible as allowed by law.*