

paying \$17 a bag for feed," grouses Kim. At Montpelier the 50+ horses are pretty much pasture fed nine months out of the year on 200 acres, with another 100 acres reserved for hay. Although TRF would prefer that the local facility host more, "I can't support 80 horses, not with the drought we've had the last couple of years; it's not there," protests Kim.

The Montpelier TRF farm was established five years ago. Kim, who comes



Photo by Phil Audibert  
**Sejn's Madness, the chestnut in the foreground, won \$460,000 on the track. Yet his owner dumped him at a sale barn in New Holland PA. He was destined for the slaughter house until he was rescued by a TRF "spotter." He now lives peacefully at Montpelier.**

from a long background as an equine professional, says she "literally begged," for the job when the opening was posted. In 2004 and 2005, she was able to adopt out 14 horses per year. Then, adoptions ground to a halt. "Last year, after the slaughter ban went into effect, the market was pretty much flooded with horses like I have, and sometimes nicer, sounder horses. If you can get one for free, why would you go through all the paperwork and pay the fee to get a TRF horse? My adoption rate plummeted. I couldn't give them away." Now, with the economy the way it is, "I'm getting them back."

And then, of course, there are the unadoptable ones. Kim approaches a mare who insists on having her withers scratched. She had been abused. She suffered from bleeding rain rot from her withers to her rump. She came accompa-

nied by signs that said "Evil, sneaky mare. Watch out for her." And Kim admits R and R Dream Girl ran her out of the stall on several occasions. But then Kim realized the animal was just frightened. "She was terrified. She wasn't evil. She was scared to death. Somebody had done a number on this horse."

After a long rehab, Kim was able to adopt the horse out. But that didn't work out. "They starved her. So, I went back and got her." She looks sideways at the mare. "I fatten you up and somebody kicks you in the head and breaks your skull." She shakes her head in resignation. "So, she's decided I'm her buddy, and she gets to stay now."

And then there was the wobbler/cribber. That's two bad problems in one horse: cribbing an annoying habit of hooking front teeth on fences, posts, barn doors, anything and pulling back and ingesting air; and wobbling, a strange spinal neural disorder that makes them, well, wobble. This horse was so bad, Blue Ridge Equine made a training video of it for veterinary interns.

Blue Ridge has been generous with its services. In return it gets a ready made learning experience for its up-and-coming young vets. Still, Kim felt she was imposing when she called for someone to stitch up a horse that had run into a fence. The vet had to do her work outdoors in a freezing early spring downpour. Last year, thanks to the annual Art in the Barn fundraiser, they raised enough money to install a wash rack with lights, hot and cold water, and a restroom. "Not standing in the rain goes a long way towards convincing a vet to come out here when I need them," says Kim. This year's Art in the Barn fundraiser is slated for October 5th.

Every day except Saturdays, twice a day, Kim, accompanied by her three rollicking Golden Retrievers, checks all 50+ horses in person. Her day starts shortly after 7 a.m. and does not end sometimes till well after dark. There are horses in stalls that need to be fed and medicated. There are stalls to be mucked, phone calls to be returned, paperwork to be done, fences to be mended, fields to



Photo by Susie Audibert  
**Horses at the TRF farm at Montpelier quickly learn to work out their differences and graze together in relative peace and harmony. Many are not sound due to track injuries.**

be bush-hogged. She does all this with one employee, Larry Hoffman. A third employee concentrates her efforts on the all-important task of fundraising. And the whole shooting match operates on a scant \$120,000 annual budget. On Tuesdays and Thursdays volunteers Jeanne Moon and Claire Taylor help out with grooming and whatever else needs to be done.

And every day, twice a day, someone, usually Kim, has to check on the old horses who live in "the geezer field." Six are in

their mid 20's, which is the upper end in equine life expectancy. And at some point, "we have to make some ethical decisions." When is prolonging life also prolonging suffering?

Kim willingly admits to having great affection for some of these horses. She knows them all by name, even admits to crying when some have left, either by adoption or the blue needle. Putting an animal down is never easy, but when that animal weighs almost a ton, it becomes not just an emotional nightmare, but a logistical one as well. There's the vet to round up and the man to carry the body away and the backhoe operator to dig the grave off of Montpelier's grounds. "So as lousy as that is, I have to get everything lined up. In the meantime he's still happy and eating...right Gordy?" Kim's voice quavers.

There is this consolation: for these horses, the ones like Gordy with the broken ankle and the tumor in his head, their days at Montpelier were their happiest, just being horses.



Photo by Susie Audibert  
**Kim Wilkins is never without her three Golden Retrievers, from left to right, Parker, Dashiell and Enzo.**



Photos by Phil Audibert  
**Top photo, suffering from an inoperable tumor on his face, Gordy's only consolation is that his days spent at the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation's Montpelier farm were his happiest. Above, "Crushy" sports a tweed cap as Kim Wilkins greets another retired racehorse at Montpelier.**

# Just being horses

Gordy is no longer with us.

Some time ago, the washed-up racehorse arrived at the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation's Montpelier facility with a broken ankle... a defective piece of equipment, tossed away as casually as one would a used Kleenex.

But then he got lucky.

They are not being run too fast too early anymore. They're not hopped up on steroids, and they're not expected to earn their own keep. For the first time in their brief lives they can run around just being horses.



A potential sponsor showed up and fed him peppermints, and when she turned to go, he hobbled after her, whinnying pitifully. TRF's Farm Manager, Kim Wilkins remembers the scene. "He's chasing her down the fence on a broken ankle. She stops, gets out and starts writing a check." Tears well up in Kim's eyes. "Gordon, you rock," she remembers saying to herself. "He was hamming it up that morning."

But then, Gordy developed a tumor on his face. They took him to the vet. The expensive surgery would do no good; the tumor would come back. "Just let him be until he can't be," is what they said. Recently the tumor grew so large, Gordy couldn't breathe out of his left nostril. It became infected. Kim had to make one of her dreaded "ethical decisions." She called the sponsor, "and she came out and fed him some carrots, and she broke down and said goodbye."

Gordy's track name was Kiss Me Goodbye.

Actually, Gordy had it pretty good. So do all 57 or so retired Thoroughbred racehorses grazing contentedly on 200 acres of Montpelier pasture. They are not being run too fast too early anymore. They're not hopped up on steroids, and they're not expected to earn their own keep. For the first time in their brief lives they can run around just being horses.

Kim, who has been around horses literally since age three, has seen the transition many times over. As we stand among a group of 15 of these animals, all of them vying for a scratch on the withers or a hidden treat in a pocket, the image of tongue-lolling puppy dogs comes to mind more readily than quivering bug-eyed racehorses.

"The three-year-olds who are super-fit getting 20 pounds of grain a day with the adrenalin kicking in on their way to the gate, of course they're wired," points out Kim. "You throw them in a field for a year and look what happens...sweet horses." She remembers when some folks drove up in a little two-horse trailer, "dropped the back, pulled the horse off, handed me the rope, slapped the thing back up and drove away as fast as they could. I said, 'Uh-oh. What have I got here?'"

She decided to put the racehorse in a 60-foot diameter round pen, just to see how he would do. "He exploded. He just went ka-boom! Freedom! I'm like saying, 'uh no, that's a large stall.'" She had to gradually work him up to the idea that life was now different...from a round pen to a one-acre paddock to "now he's big and fat and living in a field."

His story is fairly typical. Obviously owned by people of modest means, this horse was becoming a drain once he failed to win money on the track. What do you do with an unproductive racehorse? You can't afford to keep him, and nobody will buy him, particularly if he's



Coming off of the track, these horses adapt quickly to being just horses out in a field. This lot of geldings has been adopted by Ron Thompson of Culpeper County.

Photo by Susie Audibert

in New Holland, Pennsylvania. This is the end of the line, the road to the slaughter house.

Kim has seen it first hand. She worked at New Holland for a week. "It was the most horrifying experience of my entire life. I asked to be moved to broodmares and babies, because it was so incredibly depressing. So I went and got bit and kicked for the rest of the week but I could not sit there and watch those poor horses; I mean completely broken down at three years old. And you knew they were all going to be slaughtered; absolutely horrific and to see how depressed these animals were. Awful."

This is where Sejm's Madness ended up. After winning \$460,000 for his owner, he was tossed out in the trash. He was headed for the kill pen, when a TRF "spotter" at the sale rescued him at the last moment. "A lot of the killer buyers are more than happy to sell you a horse for \$50 more than he paid for it if he doesn't have to touch it."

broken down.

Kim shares an opinion held by many that part of the bad image of horseracing today is that horses are bred for speed not soundness. "I think we start them too young...to much stress on a young horse," she points out. "But it's an industry. If it's not making money, then it (the horse) has got to go elsewhere. And the longer it sits in a field, the less money it's making. Head 'em up, get 'em out, and two years old they're running. They're not really actually fully mature until they are four or five."

At least the folks who delivered the "ka-boom" horse brought him to TRF; many others are rescued literally as they are being loaded on the "killer buyer" vans at the huge sale barns



## Art in the Barn

**Who:** The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation

**What:** A fundraiser where participating artists donate one piece to be auctioned off with all proceeds to go to TRF, as well as 30% of any subsequent sales.

**When:** Sunday, October 5th from 3:30 to 5:30.

**Where:** the TRF barn near Montpelier's east gate.

**Why:** to raise money to buy hay "because we didn't get a first cutting this year." Twelve bales per week at \$60-\$70 per round bale can mount up.

Food Wine and Art!

# THE SLAUGHTER ISSUE

To many horse lovers, slaughtering and consuming horses is repugnant, akin to eating dogs in China or monkeys in Thailand. The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation's mission statement on its website says it wants "to save Thoroughbred horses no longer able to

compete on the racetrack from possible neglect, abuse and slaughter."

But as with everything else there are two sides to this question.

According to several web sites, last year, the slaughter of horses in this country was effectively banned by court order shutting down the three remaining slaughterhouses in the nation. Since then, Kim says "I've seen... a lot more horses being abandoned. They're just opening the gates and letting them go." She's heard stories of people at horseshows coming back to their trailer after completing their class only to find a strange horse tethered to their drop gate.

There are reports of horses starving right here in Virginia. "People just drive by and see a field of horses and toss another one in." Sounds, eerily like the old practice of dropping unwanted dogs and cats on the side of the road.

There are too many horses out there. This population problem is not as dire as the unchecked propagation of stray dogs or feral cats. Horses don't give birth to litters, and their breeding and gelding is much better controlled than it is in the dog and cat population.

But an unwanted animal is still an unwanted animal. And when it weighs close to a ton and eats its own bodyweight every two or three months, it becomes a problem. Also, it's not like you can keep them in your apartment; a horse needs a minimum of 2-1/2 acres of grass, and they live for one third of a human lifetime.

It boils down to the lesser of two evils. "I'm not sure

Kim smiles and points to a handsome chestnut grazing contentedly in a field at Montpelier. Sej, as he is known, has now been sponsored by Laura Hillenbrand, the author of the wildly popular book and movie, *Sea Biscuit*. He'll die old, fat and happy.

There are other angels. Bill Licle sent two racehorses here, one of them an Eclipse Award winner. They arrived with a \$30,000 endowment to ensure food, water and shelter for the rest of their days. And it is no coincidence that these two magnificent animals have been placed in a field within full view of the Montpelier Visitors Center. The Montpelier farm was established by that same gift from the Paul Mellon estate that fixed up the mansion. "It's been a pretty good situation for both TRF and Montpelier," says Kim.

And just recently, Ron Thompson of Culpeper County adopted 15 geldings because, well, he has the pasture. "Ron Thompson is a godsend. I need a whole bunch more of him," says a deeply grateful Kim Wilkins. Still, she adds, "I will not stay empty for long. They've already got horses scheduled to come down from Walkill (NY). As soon as these guys leave, the other ones are hopping on a trailer and coming straight down to make room for more."

Montpelier is one of 10 Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation farms hosting some 2,000 retired racehorses from Iowa to Arkansas to Virginia. The 501(c)(3) organization was started 25 years ago by Monique Koehler to care for retired Thoroughbred racehorses. Not long after its founding, the TRF forged an alliance with a minimum security

prison in upstate New York. "In exchange for land use and labor at the state's Walkill Correctional Facility," says the Foundation's website, "the TRF would design, staff and maintain a vocational training program in equine care and management for inmates."

The successful program has spread to nine other prisons, including the James River Correctional Center near Goochland, Virginia. Inmates learn about equine care and how to apply for a job. "So we're finding them work, teaching them how to interview, getting them through the program and it's doing great," says Kim Wilkins.

If you are a Thoroughbred racehorse owner and you wish to retire a horse at Montpelier, you must surrender ownership of the horse and, sponsor this animal to, at least, cover some of its expenses. When the horse arrives at Montpelier, it is vetted thoroughly to establish a baseline. Obviously, "most of them aren't here because they ran too well," says Kim sarcastically. "I get sound horses but they don't last long." She keeps a list of people who are interested in foxhunters, or event horses, or show jumpers. And she has a small, group of sound horses that she keeps "in work," that she tries to ride daily.



Photo by Susie Audibert

Kim Wilkins came to the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation's Montpelier farm from a lifelong career as an equine professional. She says she "literally begged" for the job in 2003.

"But the rest of them, while they can go on to become very serviceable trail horses, all have some sort of ding, an old bow, a suspensory." She points to a particularly affectionate horse, named Crushy. He walks around like he's wearing a ski boot on his right forefoot. His ankle has calcified and, it is covered with knobby bumps..."track jewelry, it's called."

The adoption process begins with an application that you can download from TRFInc.org. Send it in with an adoption fee and two references, one from a vet and one from "an equine professional." TRF needs assurance that you will give the horse a good home.

"All you need is shelter and a fence, access to water and feed," says Kim. And then, if approved, you can come out to the farm and pick out your horse. Or you can put your preferences on a wish list: chestnut, four white stockings, blaze and not too crazy, please. And like car dealerships, TRF can even DX horses from other farms if they fit your bill.

Once the adoption is complete, TRF will follow up by having your vet check on the horse yearly and send in a report that you are living up to your promise. "If you do adopt a horse, you can bring it back anytime if it doesn't work out," continues Kim. One came back recently, "Their excuse was, we didn't know we'd have to feed it," she says with a puzzled expression on her face. This is coming from people who already own other animals. Go figure.

But now horses are coming back because people can't afford to feed them. "With hay at \$10 a bale and everybody's raising their rates; feed has gone up. I'm

that starving to death is a better fate than being slaughtered. I don't know," says Kim, obviously torn. "Maybe they could have addressed other things before the outright ban. I just don't know. I don't want to see them being slaughtered. I really don't. But I don't want to see them standing in a field starving to death either."

There's another problem: the ban on slaughtering horses applies to the U.S.A. The practice is still legal in Canada and Mexico. So the kill buyers are still showing up at New Holland, buying horses that have broken down at the track, and unless a TRF spotter can save them first, they are being shipped to slaughter beyond our borders. Although there is pending legislation that would make shipping horses for slaughter illegal, it's not yet law. Kim Wilkins purses her lips. "So all we've really done is prolong their trip to the slaughter house...The poor horse has to drive farther to the same fate. That's all we accomplished."