

Seeing Past The Disability

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By Morgan Josey Glover, Staff Writer

Accompanying Photos, H. Scott Hoffmann (News & Record)

"It's not about perfection. It's not about throwing away things in this life. It's about working with a disability and really enjoying it."

Dr. Emilie Storch, owner of the Madison nonprofit, Second Chance Ranch, with Reggae.



MADISON - The only time Shelley Fincher saw horses in as poor shape as Gray and Bay was in equine rescue photos. To Fincher's relief, the two starving, blind horses — having traveled hundreds of miles from Arkansas to their new home at Second Chance Ranch — calmly walked out of their trailer to a round pen and promptly started eating hay.

"For these guys to be in this kind of shape and make this trip is really amazing," said Fincher, a volunteer at the ranch who greeted the horses at their arrival last week. "I've never seen one up close that was that skinny."

The rescue of Gray and Bay was made possible by ranch owner Emilie Storch, a clinical psychologist with a passion for horses and a mission to empower disabled animals and people.

Storch has worked for the past two years to dispel the assumption that blind horses should be euthanized because they are unsuitable for riding, competing or working on farms. Her nonprofit, Flurry's Hope, rescues unwanted blind horses from across the country and educates owners about the benefits of keeping their disabled pets.

"It's not about perfection," said Storch, who lives with multiple sclerosis. "It's not about throwing away things in this life. It's about working with a disability and really enjoying it."

Storch started on this path in 2007 after meeting a blind tourist while on a family trip to Israel. When she returned home, someone gave her a blind Appaloosa she named Flurry.

She now cares for 13 blind horses at the 30 acre sanctuary. They range from Goldie, a palomino who used to barrel race blind, to Reggae, an American saddlebred who still prances, gallops and somehow comes untied from his post when no one is looking.

Reggae competed in pleasure competitions until a veterinarian discovered his cataracts. His sale price dropped in one day from \$50,000 to zero, Storch said.

But two months after his arrival, Storch rode Reggae up Lowe Road, guiding him with her reins like she would any other horse. She teaches him to recognize her by speaking and holding her hand to his nostrils.

Storch explained that full blindness can frighten horses but they eventually get used to it and lose fear of their handlers. Horses can maintain their walking balance without vision, unlike people, she said.

“Every single one of these horses that I have out here that are blind are thankful,” Storch said. “Thankful that there is someone to take care of them, someone to take them for a ride.”

Fincher and her family have formed a special connection with the horses since they started volunteering at the ranch last year. Blind horses don’t get distracted or spooked as easily as seeing horses, Fincher said, and they rely on the subtle tones and fluctuations in riders’ voices to alert them to obstacles along their path.

“There’s a much more connected feeling that the horse has with you because they are completely trusting in you,” said Fincher, who owns two seeing horses.

Fincher’s children rode Storch’s blind horses in Madison’s Christmas parade last month. A dune buggy backfired and “every horse that could see jumped in the air and sideways,” she said. The startled blind horses just walked in circles, a less alarming response for parade participants.

“Emilie does such an amazing job with those horses, loving and caring and making them aware of their surroundings,” Fincher said. “They have a great quality of life.”

But Storch has not had success yet in placing her adopted horses in permanent homes, she said. Her number of equine friends keeps growing and she estimates she could accommodate 25 horses on the ranch.

“I don’t know why it doesn’t work,” she said about finding new homes. “People are just afraid.”