

Saved for a second chance

STEVE LAWSON/The Messenger

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Emilie Storch, owner of Second Chance Ranch, a sanctuary for blind horses located outside Madison, adjusts the halter on Holiday.

Emilie Storch knows better than most people how deceiving appearances can be. At first glance around her 40-acre ranch off Sharp Road in western Rockingham County, every horse romping or grazing in the pastures appears healthy and normal.



“No one would ever know most of them are blind just by watching them,” said Storch. “They’re just being horses.”

A clinical psychologist by profession, Storch understands how quickly the mind can jump to false conclusions. She never understood the full value of the blind horses she now rescues and retrains until a chance encounter with a blind woman on a trip abroad.

One of Storch’s fellow travelers on a European tour was a blind woman and her husband, Earlene and Charles. Storch said she was amazed at how well the couple kept up with the rest of the group and how much joy Earlene seemed to derive from Charles’ descriptions of the scenes he saw.

“I finally understood that it was her love and trust of Charles that allowed her to see what he was seeing,” Storch said. “She was actually seeing with her heart.”

That realization became the inspiration for a children’s book Storch wrote last year about her early experiences with rescuing blind horses, “Horses Who See with Their Hearts.”

Soon after her return from the tour, Storch was given a horse that no one else wanted. The horse was blind and very sick, but there was also something unique about the animal.

“After only a few days at my farm, she learned her way around the paddock,” Storch said. “It wasn’t long until she was running around paddock like she could see.”

Storch began to realize that, like Earlene, the horse’s other senses – hearing, smell and touch – had become more sensitive with the loss of sight.

“She could tell I was with her in the paddock just by the sound of steps and my scent,” Storch said.

In fact, Storch said it was not long before the new horse, named Flurry by Storch’s daughter, Abbie, began to boss around the other horses, who always let Flurry eat first.

Storch was so impressed with Flurry’s ability to adapt and learn that she started to teach her respond to commands to step over objects. That led to actually taking Flurry out on trails, and eventually riding her on those trails.

“It seemed like we became a team like Charles and Earlene,” Storch said. “We worked together as one.”

Unfortunately, Flurry was unable to overcome all of the other health problems she had prior to coming to Storch’s farm and died. Flurry’s loss upset Storch, but it also created a drive to tell other people how useful blind horses could become with love and training.



“I knew that many blind horses were killed simply because people weren’t aware of how much they were capable of doing, or were scared of them,” Storch said.

The next horse to come to Storch was another special animal. Born a thoroughbred racing horse, the young filly was blinded by an accident in the pasture at the age of three months. Although the owner wanted to put

down the horse – now known as *No Ve*, Spanish for “Doesn’t See” – the owner’s veterinarian was reluctant to do it.

Storch found out about the horse and called the veterinarian to inquire about the filly’s status. She told him she believed blind horses could be the best horses of all – and he agreed.

“He said *No Ve* was not just a blind horse, but a blind, beautiful, kind-hearted thoroughbred racing horse,” Storch said. “He said everyone that met the horse was impressed with how smart and kind she was.”

Storch made arrangements to transport the horse, along with a donkey named Eeyore as a companion, to her farm. Like Flurry, the new horse quickly learned her way around the farm. Also like Flurry, she soon had her old name replaced with a new one more suited to her new circumstances – Promise.

Storch’s third horse came from a stock sale. She said the horse was kept in the barn and the auctioneer was not planning to put her up for bidding.

“He was probably planning to sell the horse to a meat processing plant,” Storch said.

The horse’s original owner convinced the auctioneer to show the horse and bought her for less than \$200. She trained and rode the horse, then called Buns, for several years before the horse went completely blind.

That owner posted Buns’ story on the Internet, asking if there was anyone that could give the horse a good home and a second chance. Storch saw the story and contacted the owner.

“I had just agreed to take Promise, but I really wanted a second horse,” Storch said.

That’s how Promise ended up being trained alongside Belle – Bun’s new name.

Storch now has several blind horses, along with sighted horses, at her new 40-acre compound off Bald Hill Loop Road in western Rockingham County.

From casual observation, it’s impossible to tell which horses are sighted and which are blind.

“The real issue is the way our society thinks about things that are not perfect,” Storch said. “We’re too quick to dismiss anything that seems to be disabled. But I’ve found the world of disability to be even richer than that of non-disability.”

Storch was diagnosed with MS four years ago. She has gone from barely being able to get out of bed to working fulltime in a local nursing home and running the Second Chance Ranch.

“These horses have given me a new life, not the other way around,” she said. “Working with them and watching them discover they can still be useful has opened up a new world for me as well as them.”

The horses currently on the ranch are used almost daily for riding, including through wooded trails, and for therapy horses. Storch said several of the horses are used on a regular basis by young people that would not ordinarily be able to afford riding lessons.

“These horse now find value for their lives,” she said. “Many were within days of being killed, simply because they were blind. But now they live useful lives and, in many cases, are more content than some of the sighted horses.”

Watching the horses run through the hilly, wooded pasture, it’s impossible to tell which ones are sighted. The blind horses take the hills and dodge the trees with as much ease as any sighted horse.



“This was what I dreamed of after just a few months with Flurry,” Storch said. “A place where these horses could fulfill their purpose and have hope of meaningful life. This is a place of second chances.”

Helping Storch run the ranch are Kathleen Harris, the barn manager, and volunteer Tim Grant, who helps transport the horses and maintain the facilities.

Second Chance Ranch will hold a fund-raiser and open house Nov. 14 beginning at 8 a.m. There will be an antique show and farm fair featuring antique engines, tractors and farm exhibits. Pony rides will also be available.

For more information, contact Storch at (336) 420-1105 or visit the Web site at <http://www.flurryshope.com>.