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Cowgirl Spirit Rescuers 'Make Spirits Bright' All Year Long

By Anne Laughlin

Just north of Carnation Farms sits one of Snoqualmie Valley's most hard-at-work organizations, the Cowgirl Spirit Rescue Drill Team. From the road, it looks like a long livestock feeder (which it once was) and a few storage sheds assembled on high ground. But take a closer look at this 15-acre property and you will find that there is much more than meets the eye.

We met the group's secretary, Kristen Brown, on site one cold and foggy December day. From the start, one saw purpose in her stride and heard compassion and enthusiasm in her voice. It is hard to picture her having a bad day. Brown is full of optimism and determination and she puts these qualities to good use with other horse lovers, rescuing horses from unfortunate situations. She has been with Cowgirl Spirit Rescue for several years and, like other members of the organization, has worked with

horses most of her life.

Brown gave us a tour of the place: a gravel paddock (zero mud on site) fenced in on high ground, a shed filled with tack and equipment, and a long feeding trough with a few hitching posts. It was a quick tour, not much to see, but the stories behind the horses and the people caring for them were what interested us most.

When we met Cricket (pictured in the photo at right), she seemed like any normal horse: happy, healthy, eager for attention and a treat. But when she was led away, one couldn't help but notice the wobbly hind legs, much improved but still visible signs of muscle atrophy that came as a result of years spent confined to a stall, never ridden. She was rescued from the Enumclaw auction, a place where Cowgirl Spirit finds many of their rescues.

Cricket had her foal taken from her right before the auction, some-

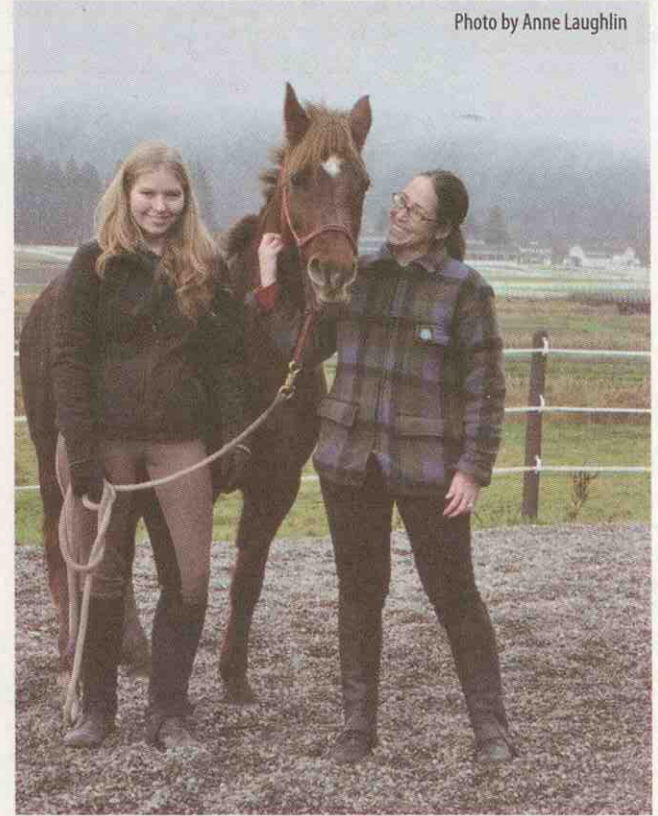


Photo by Anne Laughlin

Christina Caddell (Left) and Kristin Brown stand with Cricket, a 7-year-old horse who has spent most of her life confined to a stall. Never ridden and with hooves about 6 inches long, Cowgirl Spirit rescued her from the kill pen at auction. Her hind legs still wobble slightly but she is one of many success stories in the organization. The expansive riding facility, River Run Ranch, where Cowgirl Spirit practices and holds clinics is in the background.

thing which "devastated her," according to Brown. After Cricket settled into the headquarters in Carnation, she lay down on her side in the gravel. "She was so exhausted that she went right to sleep and started dreaming.

Brown said that she has seen as many as 20 horses end up in the pen, destined for the slaughter house. In the kill pen, these horses have one more chance at life. People are allowed to buy the horse for five times what the auction owner paid and there is a one- to two-week waiting period before horses go to slaughter.

In spring, Cricket will start classes. She will continue her training which today involves working with trotting poles and jumps. Brown says Cricket is going to make a fine jumping pony for a young rider some day soon. She is one of many horses with an inspiring recovery and a promising life ahead.

Another horse, Cheyenne, was thought to be pregnant and was "rushed" through the auction process. It was a team effort to come up with the funds to purchase the horse and today, Cheyenne is a beautiful, Morgan type mare with a promising life ahead.

Mandi, a 12-year-old Palomino Quarter Horse, was surrendered by her owner after spending more than a decade in a field mostly alone. Her isolation gave her no socialization with other horses and, as a herd animal, those are necessary skills for survival. Today, Mandi is shunned by the other horses. But Brown says she won't be an outcast forever because she is learning correct social skills and becoming more and more a part of the herd. She also promises to be a great horse for a young rider. Mandi has a sweet, willing and playful temperament and she is beautiful.

Brown is composed when she talks about these horses and about what she has seen at auction. Cowgirl Spirit cares for 8-10 horses at a time. All of the equip-

ment, tack, feed, brushes, sprays, medicines, health care, and more - all of it is donated. And all of the time spent working with and caring for these animals is volunteered. For horses that need special rehabilitation or just need a field in which they can "get acclimated," there are other locations in King and Snohomish Counties where the organization draws support. The group also relies on a few fund raising opportunities during the year.

"The Carnation garage sale is huge for us," said Brown. "On that day we can take in \$1,000."

The group is also active educating the public about equine rescue and slaughter. Those who volunteer and donate to the group have learned about them by word of mouth.

Christina Caddell, a high school student from the Bothell area, heard about Cowgirl Spirit Rescue through her veterinarian's office. She does not own a horse but is experienced and rides Cheyenne, working with her in English and Western disciplines.

"It is a rewarding experience," says Caddell. "We are re-teaching them to trust and that helps build a bond with them."

Caddell spends two to three times, 5-6 hours each time, at the location, working on chores, feeding, caring for tack and riding.

The day we visited was Katy Andrew's first day volunteering at Cowgirl Spirit Rescue. A resident of Snoqualmie and a long-time equestrian, she was quickly learning where things were at the site.

"It is a good way to get to know the personality of the horse [you might one day own]," she said. "You learn discipline, commitment and have a chance to network. My best friends are all horse people."

The work that donors, horses and riders (and future owners) do at Cowgirl Spirit is nothing short of amazing.

It is a struggle to make ends meet. The



Christina Caddell (right) shows new volunteer Katy Andrew how much of what to feed the horses patiently waiting in the background. Photo by Anne Laughlin

site needs about \$3,000 for an electricity hook-up and will then need sponsors to defray the cost of monthly electric bills. For now, they rely on a generator. They use every donated hour, dollar and item they receive. All of it is put to good use.

When we wrapped up the tour, Cheyenne, Mandi and Cricket stood patiently as they were buckled into their blankets. They were well-groomed, well-fed and well-behaved. And they are well on their way to finding their "special someone" who will adopt them and continue the care and work that Cowgirl Spirit started. Their lives have a bright future thanks to the hard work and perseverance of a handful of donors and volunteers who, like Kristin Brown, share a love of horses and an attitude that "just won't give up."

There are many people in the Valley who have experience with horses, from trail riders to winning Olympic competitors. Ask them about their work with

horses and they are eager to share. They talk about a very special bond, and a very special trust that one develops through countless hours of training, care and dedication. The commitment to these animals endures.

Whether you own (or used to own) a horse or not, let's remember that there are many in need this time of year. Along with giving trees at businesses and charity organizations there is also Cowgirl Spirit Rescue, an unassuming, perhaps often overlooked, non-profit in the Valley, that can use a helping hand. If you want to donate anything from treats (apples, carrots) to an old saddle, or if you would like to volunteer your time or write them a check, now is the time. Now and always... it is the perfect time.

If you see an animal in need please call King County Animal Control to notify them of a possible situation of cruelty or neglect.