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Lebanon camp will focus on equine education. Local horse rescuer wants to train owners of tomorrow

Owner and trainer Sara Christiansen, of Rose Ellen Farm in Lebanon, grew up around horses. Her father bred horses for racing and, when she acquired her Oak Hill Road property in 1998 and later purchased her first horse in 2000, she thought she would do the same.

But as she grew up and watched and learned about her mother's work as a special-education teacher in Lebanon Schools, and went on to become an education technician working one-on-one with students in district schools herself, she discovered she loved the personal care and attention she was able to give each child.

It's that same one-on-one care she brings to the horses with a calm, collected patience and gentle firmness and the same care she shares with and teaches her four daughters — and, this summer, students at her weeklong horse camps — at her farm today.

Christiansen, 33, keeps eight horses on the farm. Four of them were rescued off the auction block, where she said they were destined for the slaughterhouse due to health or mild behavioral issues most prospective owners don't want to take the time or spend the money to remediate.

"Quarter Horses and Standardbreds are the most common breeds at auction because everyone's looking for that next great race horse, but they're at auction for a reason," she said.

According to the Humane Society of the United States, thousands of horses are auctioned each year, but while some people looking for inexpensive riding horses and ponies purchase them at auction, the majority of horses sold at auctions are purchased by buyers who represent or sell to slaughterhouses in Canada or Mexico.

"Some horses are in excellent health, with beautiful coats and well-cared-for hooves," Christiansen said. "Others have been trucked to auction by haulers from farms where they received little to no care. Often, these horses suffer from extreme neglect. Starvation is the most common and obvious affliction."

While the reasons are varied, the animal welfare society said, some of the animals end up like this because "some people do not realize the responsibility, cost, or time involved in caring for horses."

"It could be ignorance or lack of resources, not knowing where to go for help," Christiansen said.

For example, Molly, a female Christiansen rescued last summer, has a vision impairment in her left eye and came to Christiansen severely underweight.

"She was just a bag of bones," she said.

It's taken almost a year to bring her up to her current weight.

Journey, a 15-year-old Belgian-cross, the latest addition to the stable at Rose Ellen Farm this March, also came in underweight and, Christianson added as she led him around the yard, tends to be a bit impatient.

Like Journey, some of the horses have trust issues or bad habits they've developed through lack of discipline or improper training, she said.

"You need to find out who they are and what you can do to help them," she added. "It takes time, patience, kindness to get them to show trust and respect you."

The amount of time it takes is different for each horse, but it's time she's willing to spend.

Christiansen volunteers as a leader, horse side walker and groom in the therapeutic program at High Knoll Equestrian Center in Rochester, N.H., and also fosters dogs for Labs4rescue, a New England-based nonprofit Labrador and Labrador-mix rescue organization that places dogs all over the country.

Through a new summer camp program at her own farm, she said she wants to help educate kids, the next generation of horse owners, "from the ground up" what it takes to properly care for a horse, having them actively participate in watering, feeding, cleaning, grooming, and exercising the horses each morning before afternoon riding lessons.

Her oldest daughter, Emily, 15, will serve as a junior trainer, and her neighbor Taylor Westin, 16, will earn community service hours volunteering with the program. Both are Noble High School students.

Camps run Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the farm on Oak Hill Road. The first camp begins June 25. Cost is \$220 per student. Space is limited to five campers per week to ensure proper supervision.

For more information about the summer horse camp program at Rose Ellen Farm or to register, call 457-0231, send an email to roseellenfarm@yahoo.com or search "Rose Ellen Farm" on Facebook.