

## A bond of healing

Retired thoroughbreds go behind bars for a second chance at life, and at friendship

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Sunday, August 10, 2008 11:36 AM EDT

### WALLKILL

For the last three years, Terrance Harper has come here, to a grassy patch of earth surrounded by nothing but fence posts and a mountainous backdrop.

Arriving shortly after 8 a.m., he grabs a bucket full of feed and walks, alone, to meet his girls -- Harbor, Emma, Stella and Morning Jig, whom he now affectionately refers to as Jiggy.



Though it may seem that Harper is here voluntarily, his pea-green jumpsuit tells the story: He is a prisoner.

Harper, 33, was convicted of manslaughter for killing a man in Brooklyn 15 years ago and is serving time at Wallkill Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in a serene rural setting in Orange County.

Harper has an explanation for his crime -- the man forced himself on his sister, he says - - but the horses don't seem to need any rationalization.

They come without reservation to inmate 94A2818, burying their heads in his armpits as he strokes their necks, wraps his hand around their faces, kisses their moist, dark noses and whispers in their pointed ears.

"I do things people normally wouldn't do," Harper says quietly as Jiggy rubs against him.

"I hug them. I kiss them. These are my girls and I love them."

Harper says his time with the horses has changed him.

His temperament is more relaxed. He has ambitions to continue working with horses after his release, a day that is, at minimum, 16 months away.

"Before, I used to fly off the handle but I can take criticism now," Harper said later, riding in a passenger van back to the prison. "These girls have taught me an awful lot."

Such transformations are the lifeblood of a partnership between New York convicts and retired racehorses, an arrangement that began in August 1984 when the prison obtained its first retired racehorse.

Twenty-five years later, after seeing some 700 horses and nearly 400 prisoners through the program, prison officials and horse lovers both hail the program as an unequivocal

success.

Program director Jim Tremper remembers when the 80-acre campus was a dumping ground of metal and rickshaw barns, left over from an abandoned dairy farm.

With the help of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation of Saratoga Springs, the area has been transformed.

On a recent visit to the farm, where 44 retired racehorses currently reside, Tremper sounded like the dean of a small college as he spoke about the program's evolution.

He points out the original six-stall barn, a white and emerald edifice where hay spits out of the corners, horseshoes hang on rusty nails and a tiny radio plays pop songs for idle hands sitting on foldable chairs nearby and smoking cigarettes.

Tremper shows off the classroom, where desks are scattered across a dusty floor and posters of the horse's skeletal system are displayed on the walls.

In the distance, he points to poles springing up in the middle of a dandelion-laced field, the beginnings of a new barn that will soon allow six more horses to come here.

Asked about the many horses that have spent their latter years here, Tremper pulls from his clipboard a wrinkled piece of paper with each racehorse's background.

Listed are names like Quick Call, Mario's Hope, Certifiably Crazy and Crem D'La Fete -- horses that once made the rounds at New York's most prestigious venues, including the Saratoga Race Course, before moving to lesser known New York racetracks.

In a column marked winnings are figures that run from \$600 to \$600,000.

The list, Tremper says, would read more like a eulogy than a roll call if not for the partnership between Wallkill and the retirement foundation.

"These are horses who vets say should be put down but who have a small chance," he said. "We give them that chance."

The horses come in with broken legs -- one horse had all but one leg broken -- hoof problems and fierce temperaments from years of intense competition.

Their trainers, with promising yearlings to attend to and facing the expensive prospect of taking care of the horse decades past their racing careers, couldn't spare time or patience for them.

Their ailments, without the program, could have led to very different endings.

Until a few years ago, when horse slaughter was banned in the U.S., the horses could have ended up on a plate in Eastern Europe or in a can of dog food.

Even now, the horses could be transferred to Canada or Mexico, where the slaughter continues largely unregulated.

Instead, these horses are here, and Tremper says it would be difficult to find them a better retirement.

But the horses aren't the only ones being saved.

Before Diana Pikulski became the executive director at the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation she was a public defender in Vermont.

Perhaps that is why she was quick to recognize the benefits of partnering convicts with racehorses -- two groups, she says, that have much in common.

The men and the old race horses are both outcasts and they quickly grow on one another.

The connections are evident when walking the grounds, where burly inmates drop their tough exteriors in favor of quiet affection.

Pikulski predicted such transformations.

"Horses teach these men how to deal with life without using violence or aggression," she said in an interview at her Saratoga Springs office. "If you're in a bad mood or are angry, they're not going to come near you."

The horses come in hurt, and their pain can bring to the inmates a recognition of victimhood, she said.

Tremper has seen the connections being made.

He's particularly fond of the story of the heroin addict, in on his fourth sentence, who became a drug counselor.

"It was the one time in his life that he'd encountered someone who didn't have an ulterior motive," he said.

Brooklyn native Gary Handberry, 41, who is spending time at Wallkill on a serious assault charge and is enjoying his first outdoor clearance since his confinement, is an example of the program's potential.

Initially intimidated by the horses -- his only exposure, before coming here, was to horses that carted passengers around Central Park -- he now walks among them as if he's lived on a farm his entire life.

He stood next to a 27-year-old horse named Dandy, one of the original six to arrive at Wallkill, a horse who made just \$600 in three starts during his racing career.

"You want to chill out with me today?" he asks the horse, who lacks an eye because of an earlier infection.

With two steps forward, the horse answers in the affirmative.

The affection is a marked departure from Handberry's feelings a year earlier.

"At first I was scared and didn't know what to expect but it's all right now," he said, rubbing the horse's neck. "He looks rugged but this is my best friend in the world right here. We've become partners. Every time I call for him he comes right to me."

Asked how the interaction has changed him personally, he didn't hesitate to offer a

simple answer: "A whole hell of a lot," he said. "A whole hell of a lot."

Today, there are a dozen prisoners like Handberry who spend just over two hours every morning with the horses at Walkkill.

Their tasks range from the simple -- picking dirt from the horses' shoes -- to wrapping their feet in antiseptic, feeding and bathing them.

More than that, though, they are there to comfort and assuage the horses, to calm them and reintroduce them to one another.

This, Tremper says, is where the transformation is mutual.

"A lot of these guys have isolated themselves as well," he said. "They have no social skills. They don't know how to talk to one another. In a lot of ways, they are like the horses."

Walkkill's success has engendered parallel efforts in nine other states, such as South Carolina and Virginia, where hundreds of other racehorses now have been sent.

Combined, the foundation has funneled to safety more than 1,000 retired racehorses through the prison programs.

And, although few of the prisoners in these programs go on to use their vocational skills after their release -- the work is hard to find, particularly with a record -- program leaders say there is good reason to continue expanding their efforts.

They point to people like Ernest "Sonny" Williams as one of their reasons.

The 58-year-old, serving 3 to 6 years at Walkkill on a 2003 drug charge, comes to the prison farm every day.

The 15-cent hourly wage the prison pays doesn't matter to him so much as making sure the horses are taken care of, he said.

Williams' work ethic didn't need to be verbalized -- his bald scalp peppered with sweat bullets and his white T-shirt, translucent with sweat, told the story.

"Whatever needs to be done, I do it," he said, after wrapping the hooves of a 5-year-old stallion named Regent Spirit.

And, although he was looking forward to getting out in a few months -- and maybe finding work at Belmont Park -- the idea of leaving his horses behind is unsettling, he said.

"It will hurt me to see them go," he said, after a moment of reflection. "If I could stay here and get paid I would do that. Unfortunately, that's not the case."