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by *Kate Smith* (<http://amplifiergso.com/author/kate/>) on April 12, 2015

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Horse Helpers of the High Country: Shaping time and creating a sense of zen with animal rehabilitation

For 10 years, Horse Helpers of the High Country was the only legal horse rescue in a six-county chunk of the Appalachian Mountains. What began in 2004 as a nonprofit with one horse and a Tupperware box of supplies now rescues and rehabilitates about 20 horses a year. It is one of the few sanctuaries that is verified by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries and is run by one woman and a pack of volunteers. On a November Saturday, President Amy

Hudnall is coordinating students mucking, feeding and bedding the 12 horses on the 50 acres and the four being rehabilitated.

Hudnall teaches global studies at Appalachian State University and is mentally preparing for grading exams while brushing a blind horse.

“So time is, well, I don’t have any,” Hudnall said. “But with these horses, I get lost in the moment, and I don’t worry.”

[Kate Smith] You lived on the property for a year before you accepted the presidency. What was the impetus that pushed you to take over this place?

[Amy Hudnall] I’ve rescued dogs for years, and when I was able to purchase my first horse 10 years ago, she was a rescue. The person who became the second president of Horse Helpers was my trainer at the place I boarded my horses, so I ended up on the board, and then she asked me to take over. Animals feed my soul. At ASU I specialize in genocide and peace studies, so I see the worst in people. My animals help me keep going when I see the worst in people so it just seemed natural to give back.

[KS] It seems too that not only do animals feed your soul and help you get past the worst in people, but they help you see the best in people coming here to volunteer.

[AH] We started this because we thought we were doing a horse rescue, but it ended up becoming a people rescue, too. We briefly had a halfway house for recovering sex workers,

and we had this woman who had been sold into the sex trade by her mother when she was in her teens. She would come out and just spend hours brushing. Her shadow said it is the best time of her week, and that this is what she lives for. We have prison community service, special needs kids come out, education and advocacy work and when people come out, they stay; they don't want to leave. It's just beyond words and it's beyond me why or how it happens. It probably was as important for me as them as a healing place.

[KS] Do you think that is because the horse is a big, but abused animal, or do you think it's simply that people need to take care of something bigger than themselves to heal?

[AH] Both. One of the things I have learned with horses is that they are different than dogs. Dogs are domesticated and predators. Horses are domesticated and prey, and I think that combination makes them sensitive to everything in their lives. They are physically tuned in to people more than any animal I've ever dealt with. We use them for conflict resolution workshops. We put people in a ring with a horse with no halter or bridle, and they have to get the horse to go through a series of tests. You can't just make a horse do something because that horse knows your fear. It forces the person to have to deal with their fear or be brave enough to communicate with their group that they're afraid. I can't teach someone that in a classroom, but a horse can.

[KS] How has a horse told you something about yourself that you needed to know?

[AH] Ethan out there, when he came, he was really dangerous. He knew his strength and he had no respect. He'd slam me against walls and gates. I stayed bruised for months. The person helping me train him said Ethan came here because he needed me to learn how to make boundaries. And, it absolutely is true. He taught me boundaries and I do much better with people now because of him.

[KS] What emotion or drive or understanding is it that these horses give you that you can't find elsewhere?

[AH] A sense of peace and centeredness. There's a book called "The Zen of the Horse" that talks about how horses shape time. People will leave and say, "I had no idea I was here for four hours."

[KS] Isn't that the definition of meditation?

[AH] Yes, absolutely.

[KS] Where does the funding for all of this come from?

[AH] We get some grants, but it's like pissing in the wind. A healthy horse costs about \$200 a month to take care of, which is \$2,400 a year. And we're looking at unhealthy horses with all kind of issues, both physical and emotional. We've had about 30 horses

through here this year. That's about \$150,000 and that's not paying for the facility.

[KS] So, the grants and funding you all get doesn't come close to covering everything?

[AH] No. But, this year we've had 12 adoptions and we only had to euthanize one, which is really good.

[KS] Are euthanizations the grimmest part of this job?

[AH] Definitely for me. That's what gives me a lot of sleepless nights—that and ensuring our longevity and safety. Investigations to other properties are really hard because animal control has no teeth. I'm a licensed equine investigator, but unfortunately, animal control is focused mostly on dogs and cats. So, when they have to branch out and deal with horses, a lot of times they're not trained.

[KS] What can be done about that?

[AH] The first thing is advocacy with the county commissioner. Citizens can ask county commissioners why they're not doing their jobs. In North Carolina, all horses are required to have access to food, shelter and water, but it can be algae water and it's still alright. So, talk to your county.

[KS] So, where would you like to be in, say, three years?

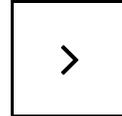
[AH] I'd like to see the rescue on its own property, and a college student located on the property so the president can focus on getting more funding and awareness. That's really what we need to see this rescue last. Who's going to be willing to make that kind of commitment?

To contact Hudnall,
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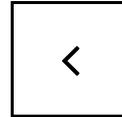


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