

SARA STRAUSS

GIVES HORSES A NEW LEASE ON LIFE AT DAYS END FARM HORSE RESCUE

Story and photos by Emily Riden



Sara Strauss at Days End Farm Horse Rescue.

As Sara Strauss deftly untacks the mare she has just finished schooling in dressage, a gaited Paso Fino named Panda is waiting nearby for her to work with next.

When she's finished with Panda, the young trainer — fit from her hours spent riding and working at the farm — could wind up in the barn devoting an hour to teaching a horse to pick up its feet for cleaning for the first time, or she could be called to help pick up a horse left to starve in what the local authorities have identified as a severe neglect case.

It's a training schedule unlike that of discipline-specific trainers focused on helping horses and riders achieve their competition goals. That's because unlike most trainers, Sara doesn't focus on a specific discipline. She never gets to choose her clientele or turn away horses that might not be the right fit, and before her

horses can achieve competition goals, she first has to help save their lives.

For more than a decade, Sara has been the head trainer at Days End Farm Horse Rescue in Woodbine, Maryland, where she has given hundreds of horses a new lease on life.

WHEN FATE INTERVENES

Sara began riding at age 6 — as fate would have it — at the farm that would become the original Days End Farm Horse Rescue property. At 15, Sara paid \$300 for her first horse, a “green-broke, crazy Arabian mare” that she still has today, 20 years later.

Around that same time, Sara began working at a large boarding facility in order to cover her new-found horse expenses, and she started receiving free dressage lessons from the trainer there, Marjorie Davis. “That's where I started

my training mindset,” said Sara, who continued working and riding with Marjorie throughout her time at the University of Maryland — College Park, where she studied animal science and equine studies.

After graduation, Sara accepted a working student position for grand prix dressage rider Eliza Ardizzone before exploring a different route working for a Western trainer. It was with that Western trainer that Sara first met the assistant director of Days End Farm at the time, Brooke Vraný, and Erin Ochoa, Days End Farm's current chief executive officer.

“Brooke saw me riding, and Erin had her horse in training, so I was working with her horse and Brooke's horse without even knowing the connection with Days End at the time,” Sara said. “They saw me riding and were like, ‘Hey! Want a job?’”

In the 30 years since its founding, Days End Farm has rescued and rehabilitated more than 2,300 horses and established strong relationships with local animal control authorities and humane agencies.



Sara works with Panda at Days End Farm Horse Rescue.

Sara was unsure what she was getting into but accepted their offer, and now, 11 years later, she couldn't imagine life any other way. "We get to help horses that were forgotten," she said. "They're not forgotten here. We're helping a lot of horses that might not have been able to get help if we hadn't been available to do that."

GIVING HORSES A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Since starting at Days End Farm, which is home to 60 to 90 horses at any given time, Sara has trained hundreds of horses and has been there through much of each horse's transformation and second chance on life — from their initial rescue to their fitness rehabilitation to their rehoming. In the 30 years since its founding, Days End Farm has

rescued and rehabilitated more than 2,300 horses and established strong relationships with local animal control authorities and humane agencies. It's through these agencies that horses come to Days End Farm, having been seized in heartbreaking animal abuse or neglect cases.

"I go out on the seizures and impounds, so I get to see where these horses come from," Sara said. "It's a full-circle thing. I see where they come in; I see where they can go. The most important part is the journey in-between."

Horses seized by authorities, many of which are examples of the absolute worst cases of neglect and abuse, first spend three to six months or longer in a rehabilitation program before moving to Sara's fitness program, after they've been given a clean bill of health and reach a healthy weight. "At that point, they have some



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fat, but they don't have any muscling at all," Sara explained. "Before you try to put a saddle and a rider on, you have to give them something to support you. On a horse that comes in that is starved, that topline is the last to come up."

MAKING THE CONNECTION

For Sara and her assistant trainer, Leigha Schrader, that means a lot of time spent on groundwork, long-lining and walking up and down hills to begin to build muscle tone. It's also during this phase that Sara evaluates the horses to establish what they do or do not already know. With the equines that come to Days End Farm ranging from feral horses to show mounts whose journeys somehow took a tragic turn, she never knows what previous experience a horse may have. They get to know each horse and their reactions well on the ground.

From there, the horse is introduced to a rider, and its under-saddle work begins with either Sara or Leigha, who each generally have only six to eight project horses to work with in order to give each horse as much time as possible.

Once a horse has progressed well and had the opportunity for experiences like trailering off-site and, for some, even jumping cross-country or competing in local dressage shows, they're put up for adoption and carefully placed into their new homes. "That is probably one of the best parts, to know deep down, 'This is a really good match,'" Sara said. "One of the most rewarding parts is seeing a horse change mentally. That's my favorite part."

One horse, named Ichabod, came to Sara overreactive and terrified of everything. At first, Sara didn't know if she would be able to do anything with him — but with time, he became a great riding horse. "That was really exciting for me to see," Sara said. "The connection that you can make with a horse over time and developing that connection is really cool."

LESSONS LEARNED

While Sara has her favorite horses on easy recall, all of the horses at Days End Farm have taught her valuable, lasting life lessons. "You see where they come from and how they probably were handled, and yet they're still like, 'Okay. We'll try,'" said Sara, who resides in Finksburg, Maryland, with her husband of seven years, Jason. "They let us help them, and they trust us. The trust that these horses give us every day is pretty amazing. They give so much back. That's something I've learned and that I think we should apply to humans as well: forgiving other people for what they've done to us."

For Sara, working with the Days End

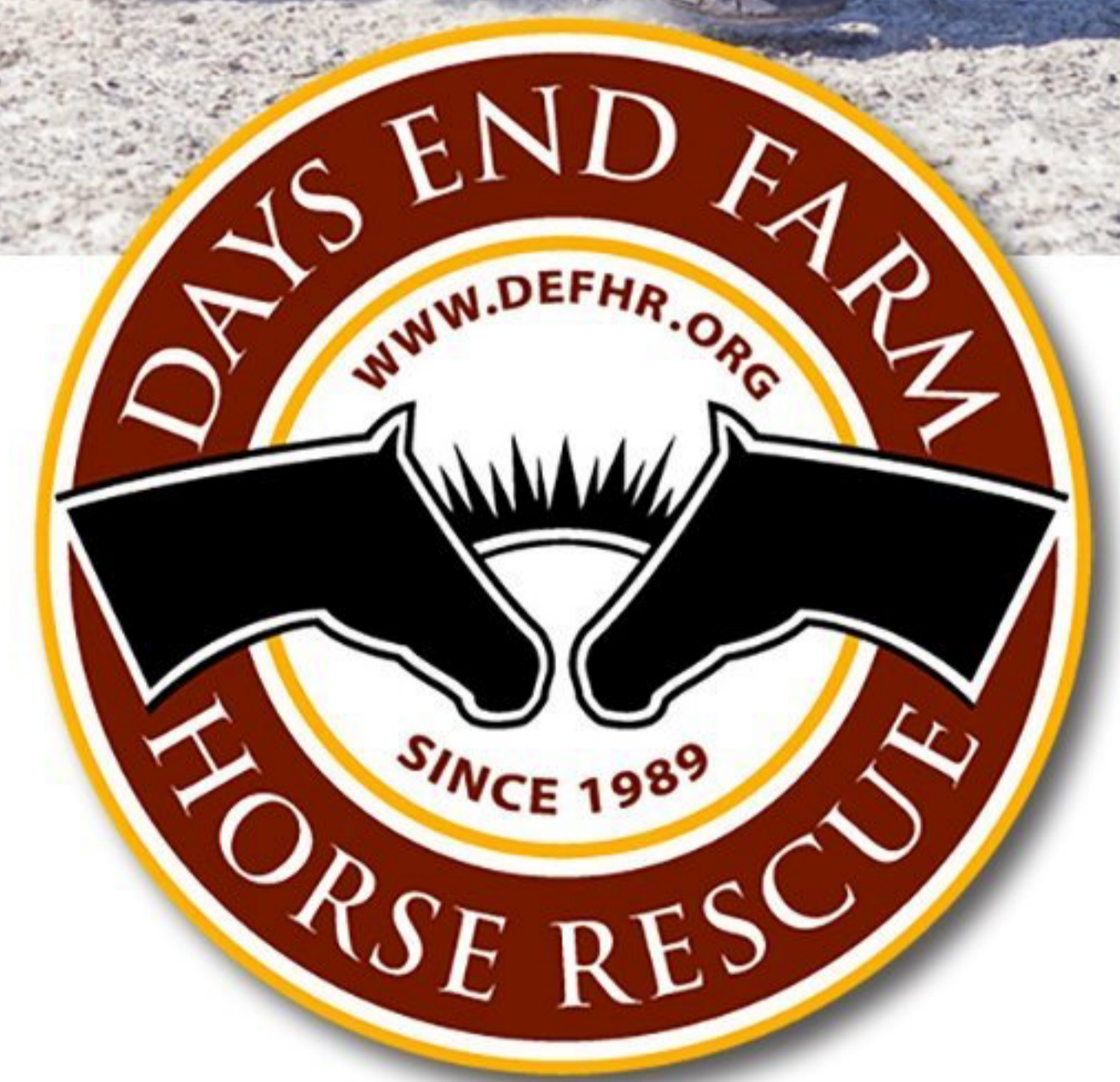


horses has also given her a new perspective on human behavior. "Even the people that these horses were seized from," continued Sara. "How do we view them? I think changing that is really important. The key is giving these people the help that they need and allowing them to feel like they can ask for help. There's a lot of mental illness that's involved, especially in the big hoarding cases. The horses teach us that forgiveness."

It's those horses and the life lessons they teach about trust and forgiveness that have kept Sara enjoying the job for the last 11 years and that keep her working hard for them. "It sounds cheesy," Sara concluded, "but it's about the horses and the mission and getting to be a part of something beyond yourself." **S**

For more information, visit www.defhr.org

Photos by Emily Riden/Jump Media



Above photo: Sara, riding Indy, has trained hundreds of horses and has been there through much of each horse's transformation and second chance on life.