

Retired Racehorses Given Second Chance

Hidden in the hills of rural De Soto, Wisconsin, and just a short distance from the mighty Mississippi, lays a haven for horses. Safely nestled in green, peaceful pastures, numerous horses are resting. They have finally found the peace and security that they deserve. The vast, blue sky is their ceiling; the stars are the only night-lights they'll see. The roar of the crowds that they've been conditioned to bear has been replaced with the sounds of the spring-fed creek gurgling nearby, crickets chirping, birds singing, and children crying out with delight at the sight of them. Even their bodies, so used to the sharp touch of a racing crop, will now only feel the caress of a gentle spring breeze or a soothing hand as it passes over their manes, necks, and sides.

This haven is not a place where one finds typical horses munching on hay or sipping from the sweet creek waters—it's a special recuperating farm devoted to rehabilitating and adopting out retired, Standardbred racehorses to qualifying adopters.

The American Standardbred Adoption Program, or A.S.A.P., runs off of this 20-acre farm on Pedretti Lane. On almost any given day, a visitor can find about 15 horses, mostly Standardbreds, romping around the pasture or standing in a stall. Most have been brought there directly from a Midwest racetrack. They are all awaiting a permanent home.

Founded in 1994 by Director Susan Wellman, A.S.A.P. is the first and one of the very few charities of its kind in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Iowa, Ohio, and Illinois. A.S.A.P. takes horses from anywhere in the United States. Racehorse owners donate their horses to the program for placement. The owners surrender all further rights to the horse and get a nice tax deduction.

A.S.A.P. offers the owners and the horses an alternative to what would otherwise likely happen to the horse—a trip to the kill market, where many horses go once they no longer bring a profit on the tracks. Buyers will buy the horses, some yet very young, to slaughter for horsemeat. Much of the meat is bought and shipped to Japan, where it is considered a delicacy.

For those of you unfamiliar with a Standardbred, this horse is raced for the harness racing industry throughout the U.S. A Standardbred is hitched to a race cart and raced around a track. Bets are placed by the public. Fast horses make their owners, their jockeys, the gamblers, and the racetrack lots of money. They are raced until they no longer make a profit or until they are injured while racing. Then, they are disposed of. That's where A.S.A.P. comes in. If the horse is lucky, their owners are humane enough to place them in the program.

Standardbreds are wonderful horses. Not only are they great harness racers, most can be broke to the saddle, which is a fairly easy process. Because of their gentle and calm nature, they make excellent trail horses and companions.

A.S.A.P. not only has Standardbreds up for adoption. Thoroughbreds, pintos, Arabians, Clydesdales, quarter horses, ponies, and donkeys have also found their way into the program. A.S.A.P. takes any horse that has been abused, injured, abandoned, or neglected.

One can credit the success of the program to Susan's big heart. Angered by the number of innocent horses being sold to kill markets, she took action and opened up her home. She and her husband, Craig, do most of the hauling from the racetracks, sometimes making 3-4 trips a month.

Once horses come to A.S.A.P., they are nurtured, treated for injuries, and photographed for the A.S.A.P. website. They get their turn at being ridden. They are also evaluated for temperament, so that the right people are chosen for the right horse. Potential adopters are required to fill out an application. They are then screened, and references are carefully interviewed. Once an application is approved, the adopter can choose their horse and take it home. Adoption fees run anywhere from \$150.00-\$800.00, depending on the horse. As anyone who has been shopping for horses knows, this is very cheap.

Susan and her staff, most of them volunteers, devote much time and money to the welfare of the horses. Many people are needed to feed, water, treat, and groom the horses. A website was developed and is maintained by a volunteer. Other volunteers open up their homes as foster homes for a number of horses. Still others help with the hauling. A secretary staffs an office in Viroqua.

Susan and her helpers regularly make PR trips to Midwest racetracks and horse fairs, setting up booths and distributing information. If this isn't enough to do, Susan is a mother of four and works full-time as a special education teacher at Logan Middle School in La Crosse.

So, how does she cross her vocation with her passion? A.S.A.P. proudly offers youth programs on the farm, focusing on youth at risk and youth with disabilities. Therapeutic riding lessons are given, and it is common to find youth working with the horses or doing chores to fulfill community service requirements. Lessons are also given on horsemanship, riding, or driving.

A.S.A.P. would love to see the public made more aware of the program's mission and activities. It is always in need of help, donations, and publicity, whether public or word-of-mouth. If you are interested in volunteering, adopting, or just finding out more, the A.S.A.P. website is: <http://4thehorses.com>. All email inquiries can be directed to Susan Wellman at "asapinc.mwt.net," or mailed to S6039A Pedretti Lane, De Soto, Wisconsin 54624.

Visits to the farm are always welcome. Donations are cheerfully accepted and tax deductible.

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