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>> WHAT IT IS: The Camp Rusk Foundation is a 501(c)3 organization dedicated to providing safe and affordable horse retirement through land conservation, curbing horse abandonment and preventing overpopulation.

A CLOSER LOOK AT:

Camp Rusk Foundation

In an age of urban sprawl and disposable culture, this organization works to provide affordable, high-quality care for retired horses.

By MEGAN BRINCKS
Photos courtesy of THE CAMP RUSK FOUNDATION

Ask Camp Rusk Foundation president Robin Shearer about her goals for the fledgling non-profit, and she'll tell you her ambitions in no uncertain terms. The group was established to solve three major problems in the equine industry: lack of affordable retirement, abandonment and overpopulation.

“There are times when life transitions make it difficult, if not impossible, to care for our horses ourselves—like a move, a job change, military duties, going to college or having a baby,” Shearer acknowledges. “Camp Rusk provides a place where a horse may be kept affordably for an extended period of time, an option many horse owners prefer rather than having to sell a beloved equine partner.”

The Camp Rusk Foundation's objective is to establish retirement ranches around the country, the first of which is already hosting a few horses on the Texas-Louisiana border. These ranches follow the model of the private Camp Rusk, a retirement facility also in Texas.

The Foundation's ranches will focus on sustainable, natural horse and land care. In addition to the Texas location, Shearer says they're aiming to plant a facility on each coast and the center of the country. Each location's system will be adapted for the weather patterns and ecosystems.

Shearer first got involved with the organization when she sent two horses to retirement at the private Camp Rusk ranch, founded 15 years ago. There, about 100 horses of a wide range of breeds from an even wider range of locations around the country are retired in a natural setting.

“I was so thrilled to see my horses happy, healthy, running with friends, on

pastures with ponds, woods and areas to graze, and first-rate care at a reasonable cost,” she says. “This was quite a unique experience for a Southern California gal!”

She soon began volunteering, and she then became president of the Foundation (which was founded in 2008) in August of 2013.

“The ranch brought together a collective of horsemen and women who wanted to make the dream they had for their horses a reality,” she says. “They wanted their horses to have a place to run and ‘just be horses’ in a natural environment.”

And while the horses benefit from the land, Shearer says the land also benefits from the horses by being open range without the stresses of work, chemicals or other artificial practices that affect the ecosystem.

While the horses are free to roam—with control over herd size and with appropriate veterinarian and farrier care and regular observations—they also provide a unique opportunity for research on horse behavior. Camp Rusk is currently hosting ongoing observational research about transitioning horses from stalls to pastures, behavioral research about herd dynamics, grouping horses by personality, using natural parasite control, and transitioning horses from shoes to bare feet, among others.

“Through the process of developing ‘the Camp Rusk system,’ much has been discovered about caring for horses in a natural setting,” Shearer says. “This continues to be a learning process. The groundwork has been laid for more formal observational research.”

Once a land endowment is completed, more formal research will begin.

“This is important, as we’re responsible for the care and well-being of live

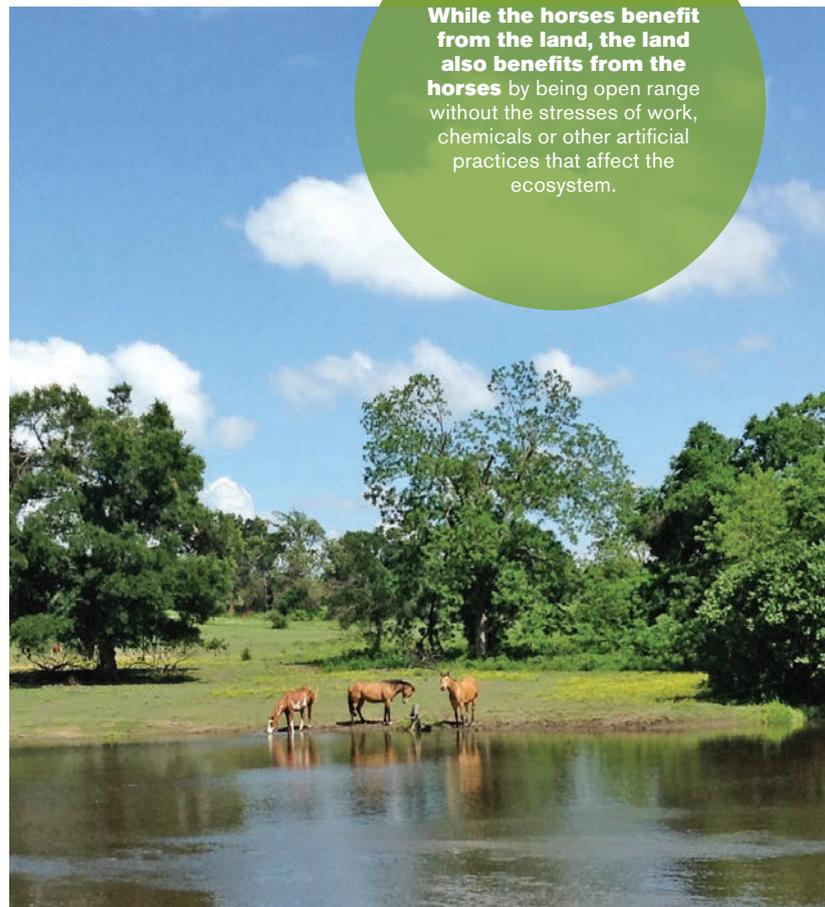
animals, and we’re setting this up for perpetuity,” she explains.

The Foundation also focuses efforts on providing education about equine abandonment and reducing overbreeding and indiscriminate breeding. As part of their commitment to the organization, Foundation members often present lessons on these topics at clinics, seminars, riding club meetings and competitions.

In order to accomplish so much, Shearer says the Foundation needs the support of generous donors to complete the land endowment so the space can’t be sold in the future for urban or suburban development. (They estimate land is being lost at a rate of 4,000 acres per day in the United States.) The group asks donors to provide the support for a single acre once in their lifetime through their “Acres That Make A Difference” program.

“If there is adequate land, retirement needs can be met economically, and land will also be available for affordable horse rescue, trail systems and equestrian sports,” Shearer says. “We need to provide the land horses need. This is a big commitment, and it’s the commitment that the Camp Rusk Foundation most needs.” ●

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>> LEARN MORE: Visit the Camp Rusk Foundation website at campruskfoundation.org.

>> GET IN TOUCH: Email Robin Shearer at robin@campruskfoundation.org or call (412) 267-7875.

>> GET INVOLVED: Step 1 on the Camp Rusk Foundation’s list of goals is completing their first land endowment, so the organization is seeking commitments to support parcels as small as just 1 acre. Visit their website for more information about how to donate to the “Acres That Make A Difference” program.