

# New Times / Cover Story

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## Her casa is their casa

*For one volunteer, animal rescue is a lifestyle*

**BY ASHLEY SCHWELLENBACH**

Whether it's a four, six, or eight-hour shift, at the end of the day most volunteers return home. They may plan to return the following day but for a few hours at least, whatever need they are working to ameliorate can fall away. Susan Schwartz doesn't have the luxury of removing herself—emotionally or physically—from the plight of abused and neglected equines: She transformed her 14-acre San Miguel ranch into an equine sanctuary three months after she moved there.

For Schwartz, the lives of the discarded animals have become her own. Her sanctuary work isn't something she commutes to or forgets when she returns home. It's always there, right outside the kitchen window. When horses fall ill in the late hours of the night, she's beside them, ensuring they receive vital care. The horses and donkeys have finally, miraculously even, found a haven in Heaven Can Wait.



### QUITE THE VIEW

*The terrain at Heaven Can Wait is hillier than Susan Schwartz would like, but the animals still have plenty of space to play.*

BY STEVE E. MILLER

The first two horses Schwartz adopted in 2002, before Heaven Can Wait existed, were Ruby and Tootsie, two equines families had "retired" by donating them to a YMCA camp in Southern California. At summer's end, when the campers return home, the horses that are walked in endless patient circles to teach children how to ride are often sent to auction.

The term auction—for equines—is an umbrella for a host of evils, including a one-way trip to a Mexican slaughterhouse. Schwartz later acquired two more horses from the same program, but it was Ruby and Tootsie that started it all.

"Once I got the first phone call and the first horses came, my husband looked at me and said, 'Uh-oh, I think we'd better make you a nonprofit,'" she laughed. Within four months she had acquired 501c 3 status. It was a prescient decision because

the phone calls kept coming, and still do today, each accompanied by a heartbreaking tale of neglect, cruelty, or just plain carelessness.

Some, like Anstar—who clownishly chews anything he can grasp, including clothing and journalists' notebooks—are former racehorses disposed of by their owners when their moneymaking days end. Many of the donkeys were owned by people who neglected their feet, resulting in painful, debilitating, and sometimes mortal conditions. Faith is a 20-something thoroughbred who was simply tied to a gate and abandoned. Her closest companion at the ranch, a standard donkey named Missy, was used for roping practice and sustained injuries to her stifle and knee in the process. Rusty—a 19-year-old mustang—was wounded during a BLM roundup.

Schwartz recounts the histories, many of which can only be pieced together after working with the animals, as matter-of-factly as possible. But when she gets to the histories of Summer and Cody, two thoroughbreds left to starve in their owner's backyard because she didn't want them anymore, her voice begins to shake, particularly as she adds that the woman who owned and neglected them was a nurse.

"When Cody and Summer arrived, the day they arrived in their truck and got out of their trailer, when I saw how emaciated they were, I cried. And I thought I had seen the worst. And then when Faith arrived she was even more emaciated. And I cried again," she recounted. "I'll never harden."

About a month after he arrived at Heaven Can Wait, Sherman had to have 70 pounds of sand removed from his stomach, a record at the veterinary clinic where he was treated. "Starving horses will eat anything they can," Schwartz said. Even sand.

While these neglected and unwanted animals need the kind of permanent home that Schwartz offers, a section of her website—labeled "in memoriam"—emphasizes the inescapable burden of one day saying farewell to her equine wards. Ruby and Tootsie are now listed in this section, along with a few other horses, and the promise that their spirits will not be forgotten.



Because Schwartz doesn't have the authority to forcibly remove an animal from an abusive situation, the horses and donkeys that arrive at Heaven Can Wait must be voluntarily relinquished by their owners, many of whom are happy to comply if it means avoiding legal charges of neglect. Schwartz insists that laws aren't stringent enough to protect animals, and even when abuse is blatant, people are rarely prosecuted.

"It's not just here. It's everywhere," she explained. "There is not enough manpower. Most district attorneys don't really want to mess with them."

"And it's so easy for an offender to say it's their first offense and they get a small fine, \$75 to \$120," added Executive Director Ramey Zamora.

As the economy worsens, there is an increasing number of horse owners who can no longer afford the costs of upkeep. Many of them are searching for a good home for their companion, but finding that horse rescues are full. Heaven Can Wait is not currently at full capacity; according to an ordinance, Schwartz can take on seven more animals, but she simply can't afford to do so. As it stands, she still needs shelter for three of her current horses.

Each horse or donkey arrives at Heaven Can Wait with its own unique background and problems, making it difficult to determine a cost for maintaining each animal. Schwartz estimates the yearly fees run about \$60,000, with feed representing one-third of the costs and the veterinarian and ferrier (horse-shoer) costing another one-third. Sometimes her veterinarians give her a discount, but only on a case-by-case basis. And the organization's budget could change in a single day, if an animal should suddenly fall ill or, as in Sherman's case, arrive at the sanctuary with 70 pounds of sand in his stomach, requiring \$4,000 worth of veterinary care in a single month.



### JUST ANOTHER DAY

*Schwartz is up at 5:30 a.m. every morning to begin feeding and cleaning at the sanctuary.*

STEVE E. MILLER

Occasionally, Schwartz applies for grants and though she isn't picky about her funding sources, she prefers alternative routes to generate donations. She turns to such events as car washes hosted by local Girl Scouts troops, stating, "I believe that any true success is going to come from the community." She sells 2009 calendars with photos of the animals she has rescued, and friendly artists—among them photographers Nancy Koren and Donna Johnson—participate in exhibitions to benefit the sanctuary. And there are some private contributions she said she will never forget. One was a \$50 donation she received after being written up in Paso Robles Magazine; an anonymous woman cashed in coins that she had been collecting. After an October trip to Heaven Can Wait, a young girl faithfully saved a dollar from her weekly allowance for four months, donating her little bag of money the following month.

"Those are the ones that aren't done for tax purposes, that aren't done for any reason other than pure heart," said Schwartz.

Her emphasis on communal fundraising efforts underscores the importance of the human faces that have come to represent the sanctuary as much as the animals that reside there. A core group of dedicated volunteers arrive every day to assist Schwartz with the exhausting daily ritual of feeding, cleaning, and caring for the rescues. Schwartz is out of bed by 5:30 a.m. to begin the twice-daily feeding and cleaning, her efforts supplemented by volunteers. She welcomes more help.

The Heaven Can Wait board is staffed by four very active volunteers and another group frequently hosts fundraisers on the sanctuary's behalf. Now that her ranch has received accreditation from the American Sanctuary Association—as of October, four years after originally filing—Schwartz hopes to silence people who might question her motives or methods. She acknowledges that there are bad rescuers, pointing to the particularly reprehensible example of a sanctuary proprietor in Southern California who misappropriated donations to feed a heroin addiction.

Schwartz was approved for accreditation when she initially filed, in 2004, but the association couldn't schedule a site visit. Eventually, the board notified Schwartz that she could send a videotape in lieu of an actual site visit. Between bouts of rain in January and February, she and Zamora filmed the facilities.

More changes are in store for Heaven Can Wait. Schwartz plans to join forces with a program in Southern California that provides horse-assisted therapy for cancer patients. One woman in treatment who visited the sanctuary groomed three horses and half a donkey before she became tired and had to leave.

"It helped her not to think about her pain, not to think about her disease, not to think about her next doctor's visit," explained Schwartz. "They don't have to care about what wig they wear. They don't have to worry about being sick. They can just be."

With additional funding, approximately \$2000, the sanctuary could invite licensed therapists and instructors to facilitate the therapy program on a weekly basis, with the hope of having it up and running early this year. The sanctuary is nothing like a sterile medical facility but it may be an environment perfectly suited to recuperation.

A white vinyl fence encircles the paddock, as close to the emblematic picket fence as the animals will ever get. Together, they wander and congregate. Sometimes, when they walk, you can see the remnants of their former life. Cats, dogs, and chickens slink and stalk about the paddocks, with varying indifference to their equine companions. Paradox is a clown and Sherman and Summer are inseparable (at least Sherman thinks they are). Goats reside at the edge of the property, on a slope looking toward Paso Robles, rescues just like every other animal on the property, but not under the umbrella of Heaven Can Wait.

Had Schwartz been endowed with the gift of prescience, she says that this would not have been her first choice of property, pointing to an entire section of land that is on a steep incline and is, therefore, inaccessible to the horses and donkeys. Chalk

white lanes wind a relief against the dust brown landscape in the distance. It's not a beautiful landscape, at least not on a dry December afternoon. But Schwartz's ranch is a hazy haven nonetheless, a permanent respite from the starvation, neglect, and abandonment that had previously been their lot.

"We help a lot of people when we help animals," concluded Zamora. "The more people we meet the more we're able to educate people. We are showing people that you can lead a kindly life."

*Arts Editor Ashley Schwellenbach mistreats humans, but loves animals. Send kibbles to [aschwellenbach@newtimesslo.com](mailto:aschwellenbach@newtimesslo.com).*

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