

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE HORSE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD™

# HORSE CAPITAL

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DIGEST®

A woman with dark hair, wearing blue scrubs, is kneeling in a grassy paddock. She is smiling and petting a brown horse that is lying down. The horse is wearing a black halter and a white boot on its front left leg. The background shows a white fence and green grass.

Ladies  
*&*  
Lewell

# The Ladies of Lowell

*A community member's perspective on a thoroughbred retirement prison program and its impact to Florida citizens*

by George E. Weir



GEORGE E. WEIR PHOTO

I had a wonderful visit with the Second Chances Farm at the Lowell Correctional Institute in May. Second Chances is a program in which women inmates of the Lowell Correctional Facility learn how to care for horses and gain an equine certification degree as a result of this experience. The horses at Lowell are donated thoroughbreds. Two of the more well-known horses are Shake You Down, a \$1.4 million earner, and Forbidden Apple, a \$1.6 million earner. This program is the only one of its kind in a women's prison in the United States. My purpose in going was to learn more about how the program helps its human participants, its horses, and society in general.

The two words that immediately come to mind in describing my impression of the program are commitment and caring. This is the feeling I saw in all the participants I met. The other vital word that describes the program is that it is comprehensive. There are good reasons for using all of those words to describe the program and its people.

As soon as I arrived, John Evans, the director of the program, introduced me to the women involved in the office educational area where they were gathered as part of their workday. In the room was an equine educational video being shown for those in attendance. There were also mementos of some of the famous thoroughbreds at the farm such as Shake You Down, various tack implements, equine anatomy exhibits, and other things pertinent to what the students learn.

After the introduction, Mr. Evans let me go out to the farm with several of the program members in turn to talk with them about their experiences with the horse care occupational program.

Each woman I spoke to had certain specific areas that they were interested in. My first interviewee, Lori, told me she liked everything about working with horses. She hadn't had any experience with horses before coming to Lowell, but the class work and book work required at the beginning of her participation in the program helped get her ready for hands-on work with the horses. Her specialty interests going forward now include training and riding with extra emphasis on equine medicine, breeding, and foaling. She also gave a lot of credit to the program for enhancing her self-recognition. She mentioned that the horses mirror their human caretaker's attitude on any given day, which helped her in that regard. Her enthusiasm and positive attitude about the program were wonderful to see. She was aware of some of the ongoing occupational successes of program graduates and that seemed to add to her enthusiasm. She also took the time to introduce me to several of the horses on the farm. She knew each one's name and history. Her care for each of them was obvious.

The next interviewee, Leslie, also had very limited experience with horses before coming to Second Chances. When asked what training she received to help her, she said that the textbook assigned initially was quite helpful, then the hands-

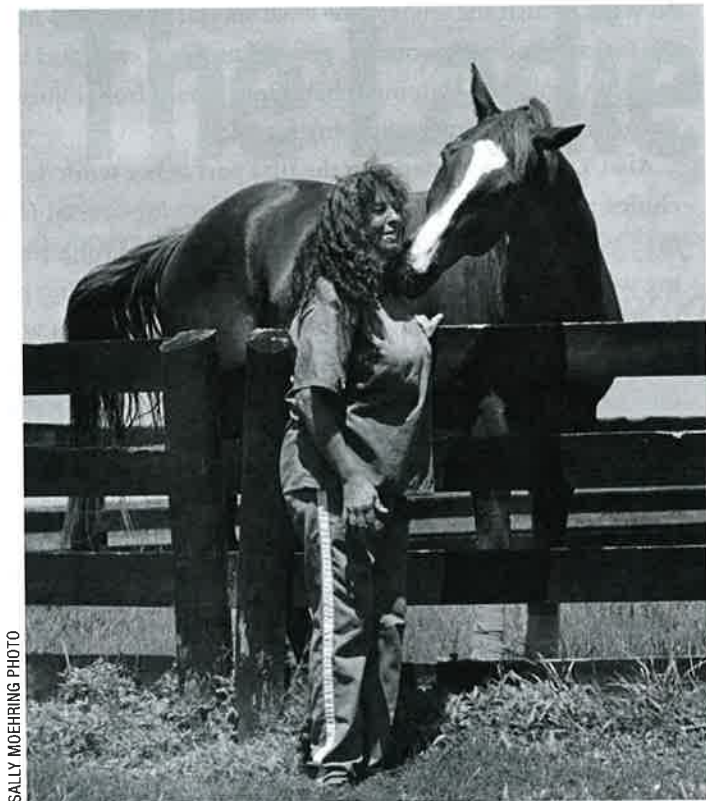
on work, which she enjoys. She gave special mention to multiple tasks including grooming, general physical care, and helping with foot care. Helping rehabilitate horses from injuries is one of her special interests going forward.

Also, Leslie mentioned that the first part of her work day includes bringing the horses in from pasture for special foods that are indicated for their specific needs. She said that working with the horses had really helped keep her thinking positively, regardless of what was going on in life. I got to watch her assist in the foot care of Frosty, a 30 year old gelding that lives on the farm. Leslie hopes to continue to do equine related work upon graduation.

The next participant I spoke to, Kayla, had not had experience with horses before her time on the farm. She said that the initial safety and academic training given was comprehensive, which enabled her to successfully transition into hands-on work with her four-legged charges. She also mentioned that working with the horses had helped her own attitude, as any horse she worked with would mirror her own. This interaction in turn helped her build a more positive outlook. Her special interests going forward include riding horses, the jumping discipline, and doing farrier work. I watched her trim Frosty's



SALLY MOEHRING PHOTO



SALLY MOEHRING PHOTO

hooves while I was there. Due to his age, he needs to be handled gently during his foot care, and Leslie and Kayla did a skilled job of taking care of that precision task. Kayla also blends the specific diet preparations mentioned that are required for each horse. Since her post incarceration living arrangements should have the space, she is hoping to take one of the horses with her upon graduation.

Based upon those interviews, the practical benefits of this program for equine and human care are many. All the participants receive academic training in horse care and safety from a detailed text book and other sources about those topics. The students are also given a firm grounding by Evans before working directly with the thoroughbreds. The training's value is further enhanced by the fact that the women do all aspects of farm work including fence construction and repairs, stall and barn cleaning and maintenance, medication administration, and all the other myriad of tasks that a farm requires. The training further qualifies them for 'real world' work in the equine field after release.

I use the terms 'caring' and 'commitment' to describe the program people, because the ones I met were incredibly enthused about the course work and horse work. Frankly, in my own four plus years of college it was really rare for me to see people as enthused about their texts and knowledge to be gained from them as are the ladies at Second Chances Farm.

The course of instruction works well, because all the students with whom I spoke were quite interested in and informed about horse anatomy, conformation, and potential illnesses and injuries.

Finally, I had a good conversation with Evans. It bears repeating that Evans trained many thoroughbreds and did other racing work in several states prior to coming to the farm, and the pictures of him with those champions on the wall of the office add plenty of validity to his qualifications. The broad experiences in the horse racing field before coming to Lowell has given Evans a large network of contacts throughout the country. These people call him on a regular basis looking for graduates from Lowell to hire in their businesses. He told me that he also reaches out to his network regularly to secure spots for his people at farms after their graduation. While Evans didn't say so, my own experience in the job market has proven that this kind of networking is imperative to get a candidate to stand out from the thicket of mechanized online form applications that are ubiquitous in today's job market.

It's also evident from talking to both Evans and his students that he cares for each individual that is part of his program. Each person there gets a core group of four or five



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horses to care for, plus assisting with the rest of the herd. There are about 50 horses there at any given time, and a total of 15 women to care for them.

Evans pointed out that the program at Second Chances also adds a tremendous amount of value compared to a strictly academic program. The women get eight hours a day of work around the horses and the farm in general, as opposed to the significantly fewer hours of straight book learning that are part of some institutions' equine studies.

Evans' experience provides the practical knowledge about horses that's essential for safety and success in the program. In addition to that, he has the vital human skills required to match the women with the right horses and duties for them. That careful matching helps build confidence and enthusiasm in both horse and student. This combined expertise on Evans' part adds tremendously to the benefits of the program.

The end result of graduation from the program is that the women receive a certificate of equine competency and care

upon completion of the course. The practical benefit of that is that the certificate is recognized as an important occupational qualification by the State of Florida. Equally important, every woman I spoke to now has a post incarceration occupational goal in the equine trade to point to, and the academic and hands-on experience to bring "hit the ground running" value to a future employer.

Finally, the societal value of this program is enormous. Evans told me that only six out of the 200 program graduates he has worked with have returned to prison. This 3% recidivism rate compares extremely favorably with the overall Florida rate for females, which is 16% according to a Florida Department of Corrections report [2013 study published in May of 2014]. This is an incredibly important benefit to society and the state.

In terms of budget, Second Chances Farm is funded almost entirely by Florida Thoroughbred Charities in Ocala, in addition to a few private donors. This underscores the

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cost effectiveness of the financial and human benefits that this program delivers to the State of Florida. It's important to emphasize the extreme importance of continuing ongoing programs like this funded with very little D.O.C. budget, but instead by the Florida Thoroughbred Charities and individual donors, many from the thoroughbred industry. Funding the program is a great public service that the Florida Thoroughbred Charities and the individual donors perform.

The horses are recent off-the-track Florida thoroughbreds that are being repurposed to do dressage, jumping, eventing, tricks, pulling carriages, and more. Delivering real world benefits to the students at the farm that, in turn, are extremely beneficial to society is a great product of this program. It's a wonderful

thing when helping horses and people together provide so much positive benefit to the State of Florida, its thoroughbreds, and society in general, so financial contributions are very welcome.

In summary, my visit to Lowell was wonderful. It was a pleasure to see the commitment of the Ladies of Lowell to the horses' care, the caring that motivated that commitment, and the comprehensive nature of the program. Evans' unique management skills help bring those factors into a coherent, beneficial whole that helps students and the State alike. Recognition also belongs to the Florida D.O.C. working with the Florida Thoroughbred Breeders' and Owners' Association and the national Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation for providing this unique program as part of Lowell. **HCD**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Weir became interested in horses when his father exposed him to the industry while he was selling veterinary supplies to racetracks across the country. His father visited historic Hialeah Park and sent a postcard of Churchill Downs from one of his early sales trips. Weir notes that his father loved palominos. His father also spent time sharing stories with young Weir about the horses his family had when he was growing up as a dairy farmer in Iowa. A graduate of Temple University with an English degree, Weir was a social worker in Philadelphia for a short time before he went on to sell food and food ingredients.

On his way to work, he loved passing the horse farms of Pennsylvania and driving through Amish country on the way to calls. Smarty Jones came on the scene and piqued his interest which intensified when he visited the Devon Horse Show and County Fair. Weir and his wife moved to Ocala partly because of all the equine-related activities. Weir proposed the idea for this article because it gave him a great chance to combine his social work interest in helping people with his interest in horses. He currently is a freelance writer in Ocala.



*Weir as a boy on a plow horse in Iowa with his Uncle*