

HOMES *off* THE RANGE



COURTESY: C LAZY U RANCH



An innovative program is helping former dude ranch horses find new homes.

BY ELIZABETH MOYER

*d*ude ranch mare. Knobby knees, but I see no lameness. Good kid's horse. Late teens to early twenties." This was the description posted on social media of a small chestnut mare at a Colorado livestock auction. She sported the brand of a well-known guest ranch, and it was the post that opened the door to a new and better way of rehoming guest ranch horses in need of a good retirement.



COURTESY C LAZY U RANCH

Ranches like the C Lazy U are proud to own their horses, provide quality care and now can promise a safe retirement through The Annie Project.

In the ranching world, it was common practice to send surplus horses to auction. It was an easy route that allowed the rancher to recoup some money, and there was always a chance that the horse could go to a nice new home. But in reality, the odds of horses bought at auction winding up on a long, cruel journey to a slaughterhouse in Mexico or Canada are far greater. For the chestnut mare, the stakes were high.

More information followed, provided by one of the staff members at the ranch who knew the horse.

“She is very gentle and probably needs her knees injected and she would be fine. She is great in the arena and a great little trail horse. It’s not fair to make her keep climbing our terrain. We used her for older ladies who were timid, and she always took care of them.”

Thanks to those words, the chestnut mare named Annie wound up at Drifter’s Hearts of Hope (DHOH), a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization in Franktown, Colo., that works hard to keep horses out of the slaughter pipeline.

DHOH outbid the kill buyer and purchased Annie for \$702. The well-mannered mare was quickly adopted by a loving family and ultimately helped create an alternative pathway for ranches to safely rehome their horses.

A BETTER WAY

Only around 20 percent of horses at auction are won by private buyers and rescues, estimates Jacqui Avis, president of DHOH. Ami Cullen, who is now the director of equine operations at the C Lazy U Ranch in Granby, Colo., was also keenly aware of this and knew they had to find a way to do better for the horses she and her staff cared about deeply.

While a social media exchange saved Annie, it was also beginning to create a backlash of negative publicity for the C Lazy U and other ranches whose brands were spotted at auction.

“Social media has really changed the stakes for everyone, whether it’s good or bad,” says Avis. “Selling horses and finding homes is a lot of work, so it was just easier back then to take them to auction. But now it’s so well understood what happens to these auction horses—everyone is a bit more educated.”

The brainchild for a better way grew from a collaboration between DHOH and the C Lazy U Ranch, inspired by Annie, who was a C Lazy U horse.

“We wound up sitting down together and coming up with the idea to take in their retiring horses, and then it just grew from there,” says Avis.

In June of 2017, the C Lazy U skipped the auction and began taking the horses that were no longer a fit for their program directly to DHOH to be placed into adoptive homes through what eventually became known as The Annie Project.

“And then it was well, let’s not stop at the C Lazy U; let’s try to get more ranches involved,” says Avis.

Today the C Lazy U is proud to be fully transparent with guests about their horses’ retirement and actively supports and promotes the program at DHOH. In return, they get to see their horses go off to great new homes where they can be loved and enjoyed.

“It’s the right thing to do,” says Cullen. “Jacqui has the facility and the connections to rehome these horses easily.”

MORE RANCHES JOIN

A total of 11 ranches are now participating in the program. Avis and the team at DHOH have actively reached out to the guest ranches in Colorado and worked with the Colorado Dude and Guest Ranch Association to get the word out.

“When we heard that they would selectively home our horses and make sure that they would be loved and cared for, it was a no-brainer!” says Christine Prince, owner of Cherokee Park Ranch in Livermore, Colo., which is an Annie Project partner. “We own over 130 horses, and they are members of our family. When they reach the point of not being able to negotiate mountainous terrain, we retire them,” she explains. However, she notes that while the horses may no longer be up to the rigors of ranch life, they still have life and love left in them.

“When we toured the facility and spoke with the founder and volunteers, we knew this was the right place for our horses. Rather than horses wasting away in the field without purpose or worse [brought to auction], DHOH gives horses another home.”

The program has gotten a great response from ranches, says Avis.

“They no longer have to feed 20 horses that they’re not using anymore, and know that they’re getting good homes. Now there is a better option.”

“We feel very privileged to be partnering with them,” says Prince. “And the best part is that we follow them on Facebook and see when they rehome our horses!”

RANCH HORSES RULE

While the horses are no longer able to keep up with the demands of working almost every day for five or six hours carrying guests over mountainous terrain, they can still do quite well in a less-demanding job as a pleasure horse or weekend trail horse.

“They are much more sound when they come out of the mountains and the workload is lighter,” says Avis.

Temperament and training are the biggest benefits former dude ranch horses have to offer.

“If they’ve been guest horses, they are pretty tried and true,” she continues. “They’re safe horses for beginners or kids, and that’s what a lot of people are looking for at a rescue—beginner horses. These horses really fit that bill.”

Hailey Loveday is one of those riders who came to DHOH in search of her first horse.



Willow became Hailey Loveday's first horse. They've done a lot together, both in and out of the arena.



COURTESY HAILEY LOVEDAY

"Once I found Willow, I knew the search was over," she says. "There were so many perfect qualities about her. She was gentle enough to teach me yet still had enough sass to challenge me."

Loveday has taken Willow on cattle round-ups and many miles of trail riding, obstacle courses and more.

GOLDEN OLDIES

The former ranch horses generally have a level of training and experience that makes them highly adoptable.

"I think the reason our horses have been so successful in their new homes is because they've been exposed to so much, plus all the natural horsemanship, riding and training we put into them," says Cullen. "The longer they're here, the better they get. They're just good, safe horses, lots of them kids' horses, which are not always easy to find."

When it comes to children's mounts, dude ranch horses in their golden years are worth their weight in gold, as the Sheldon family discovered.

They found a perfect first horse for their son Carter, a 9-year-old aspiring roper, through the Annie Project. Jacqui matched them up with Sonny. The 20-year-old horse had worked at the Colorado Cattle Company and then as a lesson horse at Sylvan Dude Ranch before being retired to DHOH.

"Carter fell in love instantly," says Samantha Sheldon, Carter's mom. "I was trying to think of words I could use to describe the relationship that Carter and Sonny have, but I just can't. It's phenomenal.



COURTESY SHELDON FAMILY

Carter, age 9, is an aspiring roper who has gained confidence from 20-year-old Sonny.



Guest ranch horses are usually well trained and have been ridden extensively on trails, around cattle, and have been exposed to many distractions through the hustle and bustle of ranch life.

“Sonny lets Carter drag him around everywhere, in the pasture or in the arena. Anything that Carter asks of Sonny, he does, and he protects him doing it.

“Carter pulls himself up on the saddle by himself, kicks his legs over, and they take off. And it’s been like that from day one. Carter is a diehard cowboy. That’s his dream. And Sonny has given him all the confidence in the world.”

The Annie Project gets horses of all ages and experience levels, since ranch riding programs have a variety of needs.

“Willow was 14 years old when I was lucky enough to find her, and full of spunk,” says Loveday. “I’ve been watching some of the newer horses come into the rescue at the age of 8 or 9 that were guide horses. There is a perfect match for everyone when it comes to an Annie Project horse.”

MOVING FORWARD

To date, the Annie Project has taken in 63 dude ranch horses and adopted out 54, with six currently up for adoption and three that had to be euthanized.

“We would love to get more ranches in Colorado, and eventually we’d love to see the pro-

ject expand out of state,” says Avis. “The next step is more rescues to partner with that can help us take more horses. Nationally, we would love to start talking to some other rescues to help to start programs in their area.”

Avis’ favorite part of the program is seeing the former ranch horses making special connections.

“At the dude ranch, they don’t get to connect with their riders; they just take them up the mountain,” she says. “When they come here and get adopted and get their own person, or their very own kid, it’s super rewarding. That’s one of my favorite parts. They get lots of love. They’re not just a number anymore.”

“Without the Annie project I wouldn’t have found my soul horse,” says Loveday. “I wouldn’t have the horse that nickers across 20 acres and trots across the creek to greet me at the gate. I’m forever grateful for the Annie project for giving dude ranch horses a second chance.”

For more information about the Annie Project, visit www.driftersheartsofhope.org. 📄

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