



- FRONT PAGE
- LOCAL
- NATIONAL
- WORLD
- WEATHER
- EDITORIALS
- OPINIONS-LETTERS
- SPORTS
- SCENE
- LIFE
- REAL ESTATE
- CLASSIFIEDS
- BUSINESS
- ADVERTISING INFO
- SPECIAL SECTIONS
- FEATURES
- ARCHIVES
- COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS
- SITE INDEX
- PHOTO GALLERY-NEW OKIES

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Home » Life

Email Story

Print Story

RUN WILD, RUN FREE - Return to Freedom, a wild horse sanctuary inland from Lompoc, marks its 10th anniversary this year

BETHANY HOPKINS, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER
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Neda DeMayo walks up to Taj Radda, a gray Arabian horse now in her teens. Without ropes or a harness, Ms. DeMayo clicks her tongue softly and gently coaxes the mare to trot and follow her around in a wide circle and stop when she signals. Taj Radda is one of about 220 horses at a 300-acre wild horse sanctuary inland from Lompoc. Some, like her, are receptive to humans, and some are wild and keep their distance, but they all share one thing in common - they were brought to these rolling hills as part of Ms. DeMayo's effort to protect and preserve their kind.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of her founding of the nonprofit group Return to Freedom, her effort to protect America's wild horses and educate the public about them. The year after she started the group, she bought a run-down chicken ranch in the Jalama Valley that now houses Return to Freedom's American Wild Horse Sanctuary.

Ms. DeMayo said that she knew that she loved horses from a young age.

"My mom said my first word was 'horse,' " said Ms. DeMayo, now 47. "I was riding when I was five years old."

Fast forward to 1995, when Ms. DeMayo was working in Los Angeles in the film industry and heard reports that some horses from the Bureau of Land Management's wild horse adoption program had ended up being slaughtered.

"I always wanted to have a place where wild horses could run free," she said. "I started to go, 'I need to do it now.' " After two years of visiting other horse sanctuaries and studying how to start a nonprofit, she was on her way. Her parents moved out to the Jalama Valley property, helping their daughter as she cleaned up the old ranch and developed the sanctuary.

Now Return to Freedom has a donor base of more than 25,000 individual donors, along with corporate sponsors such as Mid-State Bank & Trust, Wild Horse Winery, and Grand Meadows Nutritional Products. Celebrities, including one-time youth ambassador Hilary Duff, have also lent their support to her organization.

Horses come to the sanctuary for a variety of reasons -- they are removed from public lands, placed in the sanctuary to preserve their breed, or rescued from unhealthy conditions. Ms. DeMayo's sanctuary model is unique in that the population is managed by a nonhormonal form of birth control, and the horses are arranged in natural groupings.

"I wanted to manage the horses in their natural herds," Ms. DeMayo said. "They are separated according to their geographic origins."

That includes some rare groups, like the Wilbur-Cruce Mission herd, which descended from the horses brought to America by the Spanish in the 16th century. The herd was discovered by The Nature Conservancy in Arizona and placed in the sanctuary for preservation by The Minor Breeds Conservatory.

Visitors to the sanctuary can take a living history tour; they watch the horses with a guide who answers questions about the herds' origins. There's the wild horse walking tour, a quieter walk focused on observation of herd behavior. At volunteer weekends, volunteers do everything from washing water troughs to painting buildings, whatever's needed to keep the sanctuary in good shape. Horse clinics are sometimes offered too; participants learn skills like horsemanship without the use of harnesses or ropes, Reiki energy healing techniques and animal communication.

The last topic is one that Ms. DeMayo addressed two weeks ago at Eastern Kentucky University, when she spoke at the 2007 conference of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States. She gave a demonstration there about how she connects to and communicates with horses.

"They're a prey animal -- (to them) you're a predator, they don't automatically trust you," she said. Even a familiar horse like Taj Radda takes some coaxing and a few minutes of patience on Ms. DeMayo's part to get into the rhythm of responding to her.

Several events stand out to Ms. DeMayo from the last decade of running



Above, horses are let out for a run at Return to Freedom American Wild Horse Sanctuary in the Jalama Valley, near Lompoc. Top, a group of horses from Utah enjoy a meal.

MIKE ELIASON / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



Neda DeMayo, founder of Return to Freedom, a group dedicated to protecting America's wild horses and educating the public about them, stands with Spirit, a Kiger Mustang used as a model for the movie "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron."



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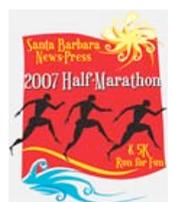
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Return to Freedom. One of the highlights she noted was in 2002, when the sanctuary received a horse named Spirit. Spirit was the Kiger Mustang stallion that artists used as a model for the movie "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron," a 2002 animated DreamWorks film about a horse struggling to remain free.

"The film company decided to give him to us to help us reach people's

hearts," Ms. DeMayo said. "He's a wonderful ambassador -- he keeps kids interested."

A heart-wrenching challenge for Return to Freedom came in 2003, when a Buellton rancher who had more than 500 horses on his property was investigated after reports that he neglected his horses. Return to Freedom ended up taking in 125 of the horses, a number of whom were undernourished, and keeping them on the property for eight months while returning them to normal health.

A smaller, more recent rescue of horses in need happened just a few months ago. The abrupt suspension of horse slaughter in Illinois allowed Return to Freedom to have four horses removed literally from the slaughterhouse and brought back to the sanctuary.

"We call them miracle horses, because it just doesn't happen that they come out of there alive," Ms. De Mayo said.

That rescue is part of Return to Freedom's larger involvement in the anti-slaughter movement, which became a more urgent concern in 2004 when an appropriations bill from Congress effectively legalized the slaughter of wild horses.

Illinois is the last state where horse slaughter, though temporarily halted this year, still continues while a state ban works its way through an appeal process. Jill Anderson, communications and outreach director at Return to Freedom, has closely followed the legislation process, but said that the current bans in the United States will still not protect horses completely.

"Until a permanent ban comes from Congress to prohibit the transport of horses to slaughter, they will be sent overseas," or to Canada or Mexico, for slaughter for human consumption in other countries.

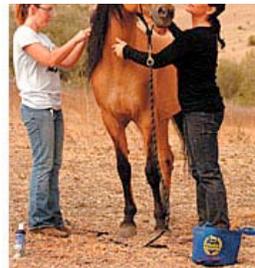
For now, Ms. DeMayo has been focusing her efforts on trying to set up satellites of her program and do consulting work at other sanctuaries. She said her hope is to someday establish a conservancy and historic land trust. The documented DNA of some horses, including some herds at the sanctuary, has been linked to the Iberian primitive horse that may have been on this continent as early as 26,000 years ago, making the horses a native species to be protected.

Some of the more domesticated horses at the sanctuary will only stay there until they are ready to be adopted. Many others will live out their days in the pastures of the Jalama Valley. Ms. DeMayo said that her goal, as always, is teaching others about the horses so that they care enough to want to protect them.

"Encouraging people to fall in love with them is the only way they'll want to conserve them."

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IF YOU GO Living history tours for adults are offered 10 to 11:30 a.m. Fridays through Sept. 7, with an additional tour from 3 to 4:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 8. There is a Youth Tour for families with children younger than 12 from 10 to 11:30 a.m. on Saturday, Sept. 8. Suggested donations are \$20 for adults; \$10 for children under 12. A Wild Horse Walk, from 3 to 6 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 8, offers an intensive study of wild horses, their role in the American West, and their herd behaviors. Participants tour the facility first, then hike into the hills to observe wild horses. Hiking is moderate to strenuous, and not recommended for children under 12. Suggested donation: \$50. A Youth & Family Volunteer Work Weekend will be held on Saturday and Sunday. For more information, call 737-9246 or go to www.returntofreedom.com



At top, from left, Merced Tagle, Return to Freedom founder and director Neda DeMayo and equine biologist Celeste Carlisle feed horses at the sanctuary. Above, Spirit is groomed by Celeste Carlisle, left, and Neda DeMayo.

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