

remarkable woman

Gail Vacca

She traded a career training horses for one that rescues them

By WILLIAM HAGEMAN | Tribune Newspapers

Gail Vacca can pinpoint exactly when her love for horses began.

She was 4, on a family vacation in New Jersey, and her horse-loving grandfather asked her if she wanted a pony ride.

"I still remember it," says Vacca, founder and president of the Illinois Equine Humane Center (ilehc.org),

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a horse rescue based in Big Rock. "It was a black pony named Buttons. We went back the next day and I rode another one, Chalks. (My grandfather) had created a monster."

She got her first horse at 5, by 6 was taking lessons and competing in shows, and at 8 was jumping with a big thoroughbred that her grandfather had bought her. When she was a teen, she and her grandfather frequented Rockingham Park racetrack in Salem, N.H.

Enter Cracklin Ruby, a 2-year-old filly with a fractured knee.

"My grandfather said they were going to send her to the glue factory. That's what they said back then. My grandfather wondered if I'd want to take her in and try to fix her and save her life."

Vacca not only rehabilitated Cracklin Ruby, but also retrained her to become a successful show horse. That set Vacca on a path that led to a career in racing as an exercise rider, hot walker, groom and finally a successful trainer. Her work brought her to Illinois in 1988, but her career took

a sharp turn in 2002. She wound up leading a successful fight to end horse-slaughtering operations in the U.S., and has become a vocal advocate for better treatment of horses. In 2008, she helped found ILEHC, which leases about 20 acres in Kane County, and where relinquished and rescued horses are rehabilitated and re-homed. It currently cares for 15. Following is an edited transcript of our conversation.

Q: What turned you from an industry insider to an activist?

A: I was home (in DeKalb) on Easter Sunday in 2002, out in the barn, taking care of my horses and listening to the radio. They said the Cavel horse-slaughtering plant in DeKalb had burned down the night before. I ran back to the house and said to my boyfriend, "The radio says a horse slaughtering plant in DeKalb burned? In DeKalb?" And he said, "Didn't you know?" It deeply disturbed me. So I started investigating what these places were and what they entailed. It doesn't take long to realize it was an absolutely, grotesquely inhumane practice.

Q: How widespread was it?

A: At the time there were only three: one in DeKalb and two in Texas. But they killed 100,000 horses a year. I thought, well, at least the one in DeKalb burned down. But then the plant said they were going to rebuild. No. No. Over my dead, cold body.

Q: And the fight began, first in Illinois, then nationally, to end horse slaughter.

A: I took it on with great naivete. ... It was going to be a no-brainer. We don't eat horses, and once people know we'll get it stopped. But it took a lot of work on our side. I quit training in '02 and was commuting almost weekly to Springfield, lobbying. The first two or three times the bill came up, it lost. Who knew it would take five years to get it passed? Finally in 2007 we passed the bill (banning the slaughter of horses in Illinois for human consumption).

Q: But that wasn't the end of your work.

A: I started going to these low-rent auctions, to get horses, especially racehorses, out of this slaughter pipeline. (The horse-processing operations moved to Canada and Mexico.) I'd go to the auctions and see the abuse the horses suffered on the way to slaughter. In the beef and pork industries, they have a vested interest in keeping the animals well cared-for. In the horse slaughter industry there's ... no interest in keeping the horses in good condition. We have documents we obtained via the Freedom of Information Act that detail the abuse at those three plants in the U.S. People have no idea what they do to horses.

Q: As someone who comes from the racing industry, are you better able to campaign for changes?



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A: People will listen to me, not to PETA. After 20 years of beating the racing industry over the head, writing blogs, being in magazines and newspapers, going on TV, saying the industry has to be responsible for caring for their animals, it's starting to sink in. More racing jurisdictions are coming around, funding aftercare for horses, and working with rescues.

Q: Has the recession meant more horses in need of rescue?

A: Last year was tough. It was the perfect storm: More people

had to give up horses because of financial problems, the drought caused the cost of hay to increase, donations are down because of the recession. And now we need to look for a new location. The land we lease as pasture land is being converted to crop land. That makes it much more expensive to lease. So we need to find a new home. We think 2013 is going to be a sink-or-swim year for us.

Q: Does ILEHC take up all your time? Do you have hobbies, for example?

A: I work seven days a week, so any time off is spent trying to recoup. My significant other and I go to movies. We hang out together and with our two dogs, Bella and Titus. They're Cane Corsos. It's like having two little ponies in your home because they each weigh 140 pounds. We take the dogs swimming or to the park, take them on our vacations.

Q: What music do you like?

A: I love the classic rock bands, Boston, Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin, etc. That said, I also really enjoy

Drawing inspiration

The classic 1946 movie "Black Beauty" and the Anna Sewell novel from which it was adapted were pivotal influences for Gail Vacca. "The book and movie affected me deeply as a child and (were) likely partially responsible for developing my interest in animal welfare. ... My favorite quote listed on my Facebook page is borrowed from Anna Sewell: 'My doctrine is this, that if we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt.'"

exceptionally talented singers and musicians of any genre such as Elton John, Barbra Streisand, Christina Aguilera, etc.

Q: Have you ever been to the Kentucky Derby?

A: I have been to both the Kentucky Derby and Breeders' Cup at Churchill Downs. Churchill Downs is a beautiful and historic facility and attending the Derby there is a magical experience that everyone should enjoy at least once. A "bucket list" must!

Q: When you were a kid, did you have any heroes?

A: My grandfather. ... He was the kindest, most honest, genuine person you'd want to meet. I didn't have to look outside his example for a hero. He had respect for animals and for life in general.

The Illinois Equine Humane Center (ilehc.org) always has room for volunteers, even those without equine backgrounds; it also has horse sponsorships and needs homes for adoptions or fosters.

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