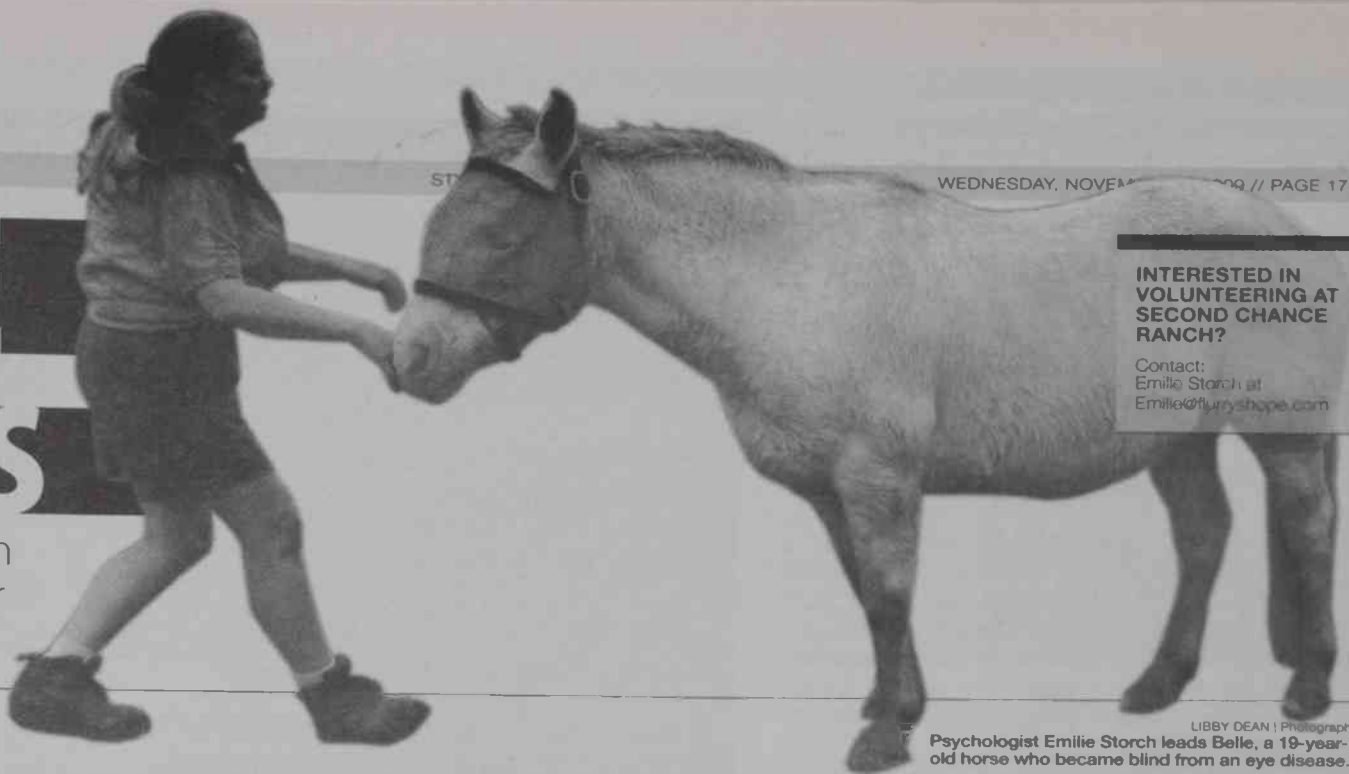


HOP for HORSES

Second Chance Ranch provides a new life for blind horses



INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING AT SECOND CHANCE RANCH?

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LIBBY DEAN | Photographer
Psychologist Emilie Storch leads Belle, a 19-year-old horse who became blind from an eye disease.

Libby Dean
Reporter

Promise was a strong, healthy Thoroughbred horse. She was born on a Kentucky horse farm, bred as a racehorse. She was full of potential. She was beautiful and fast, and before she was 1 year old, she was already worth more than \$25,000.

One day, Promise hit her head at the farm and damaged her optic nerve, causing her to go blind.

Her owners tended to her in hopes that she would regain her sight, but when a veterinarian informed the owners that Promise was permanently blind, she was considered worthless and arrangements were made to have her euthanized.

Belle was a 19-year-old Appaloosa/draft mix. She was a strong horse, who became blind from the eye disease equine uveitis, and because of her blindness she was sent to

a slaughterhouse to be killed so her meat could be used to make dog food.

Fortunately psychologist Emilie Storch, who rehabilitates and cares for blind horses, the lives of Promise and Belle were spared.

Storch owns Second Chance Ranch, a 40-acre horse farm located in Madison, N.C., about an hour's drive from Elon. Storch said her mission is to increase public awareness about blind horses and their potential for riding.

Storch's campaign is also known as "Flurry's Hope," after the first of Storch's blind horses, who served as the inspiration to create a blind horse farm. Storch lived on a small farm when Flurry was given to her. The horse was blind but trusting, kind and brave she said.

Flurry unexpectedly died in May 2007, and Storch was so inspired by Flurry that she started Flurry's Hope.

Roger Southern, manager of Second Chance Ranch, said the

farm relocated to its present location in February.

Second Chance Ranch currently holds 18 horses, 11 of them blind, but the number fluctuates as more horses are brought to the ranch. The ranch accepts horses from across the country and currently houses horses from states Oklahoma, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Florida and Louisiana.

For a horse to be admitted to Second Chance Ranch, it must fit certain criteria. The horse must be able to be ridden, in good health and would have otherwise been killed, Storch said.

"I think it's criminal to send a perfectly healthy horse to death because they are blind," Storch said. "The world is caught up with this idea of perfection and needs to realize that these horses are perfectly fine."

Storch said she prefers blind horses. Blind horses will not get "spooked," or startled, she said. Instead, they are

gentle, loving and will never run away. Storch said she also feels a close bond with blind horses.

"There is an incredible rider-horse connection with blind horses," she said. "There is so much trust involved, and the horses are so connected to you because they place so much trust in you."

Southern said riding a blind horse is not much different than riding a sighted horse because, with each case, the rider controls the horse's direction with reigns.

Driving up, Second Chance Ranch looks like any other horse farm, with horses grazing lazily in the pasture, walking around and interacting with each other. There are paths for horseback riding, a large barn and dogs and cats casually roam around.

"There is not a whole lot of differences between a blind horse and a sighted horse," Storch said. "Their senses get so acute that you almost forget that the horses are blind."

Storch said the horses can sense objects around them by their keen sense of hearing. One horse, Diamond, knew to walk around a sign in the pasture. The horse heard sounds bouncing off of the sign and knew that she was approaching an obstacle. Storch said this is a common occurrence.

"Second Chance Ranch is based around the idea of redemption," Storch said. "These horses didn't have any hope, and now they are becoming all that they were made to be. These horses are not just coping—they're excelling here."

Second Chance Ranch is run by volunteers, and Storch said they are always looking for new volunteers to come and help out with the ranch.

"These horses seem to be saying to the world, 'Look and see what I can accomplish when I get the chance,'" Storch said. "We're so blessed to be doing what we do for these horses."

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