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For love of mustangs

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DIXONVILLE -- Buddy would make a horse lover out of anyone. The 3-year-old palomino bristles with personality, whether he is picking up a rake with his teeth, or pushing his head curiously through his pen to wrap his lips around the nearest hand.

"Buddy has to have his mouth on something all the time. He carries shovels in his mouth, he carries brushes ..." said his owner, Dixonville resident Darla Clark. "I had to pick the problem child, but you can't pick who you love."

Clark acquired the 16-hand gelding from a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service adoption program in Nevada, which manages wild horses and burros on the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge.

Unlike the widely known Bureau of Land Management mustang adoption program, Fish and Wildlife does not have an extensive adoption infrastructure and may destroy horses not placed in homes.

"Fish and Wildlife can go out, and they have in the past, just gone out and shot them," Clark said.

It was her desire to help, coupled with a lifetime spent around horses, that led the Dixonville resident and her husband, Troy Clark, to start a nonprofit corporation to help Fish and Wildlife adopt out the horses and to rescue other animals. They call it Strawberry Mountain Mustangs, Inc., after the 110-acre ranch they own in Dixonville.

The Clarks took on 10 mustangs from the Sheldon herd last summer, all but two of which have been placed in homes.

Buddy was the horse that acquainted the couple with the adoption program. Darla bought him from Lookingglass resident Bob Geyer, who had also taken on some Sheldon horses.

"Buddy was our first horse, and she hadn't had any horses since high school," said Troy Clark. "I'd never been around horses at all."

Troy learned to ride on Buddy and a chestnut mare, Indy, they adopted through a rehabilitation program soon afterward.

Though Buddy was lice-ridden and infested with parasites when they adopted him, he soon grew into a tall, handsome horse with a sleek, golden coat and flaxen mane.

"Everybody that looks at him says, 'He can't be a mustang, no way!'" Clark said.

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Clark said a common misconception is that mustangs make poor pets because they grew up in the wild.

“I had one lady ask me, ‘Do they bite?’”

The truth is, their unfamiliarity with humans makes them ideal pets, once they grow accustomed to domesticity, Clark said. Though they are initially scared and very independent, they soon grow to trust their new owners as long as they are treated with kindness and respect.

Roberts Creek resident Larry Coble, 74, owns a 2-year-old filly he adopted from the Clarks last fall.

“I’m guessing probably it took me three months before I could get up and touch her,” Coble said. “I had her in a round pen and I’d go out there and work with her every day and we’d get up nose to nose probably a foot apart and that’s as close as she’d let me get. Finally, she run up and just kissed me twice ...”

In addition to Buddy and Indy, Darla and Troy adopted another chestnut quarter horse they call Dusty, and are working with two yearlings named Red and Ardie and Ardie’s mother, a chestnut mare named Fancy.

They are currently preparing their ranch to house another 10 mares and young stallions from the Sheldon herd late this summer or early fall.

Though the Clarks have found the experience rewarding, it has also been time-consuming. Darla works full-time as a clerk in the courthouse and Troy holds down a full-time job at Caddock Electronics in Glide.

It has also been expensive.

In less than a year, the Clarks have spent at least \$5,000 in veterinary bills, food and other necessities. They soon decided they must solicit donations from the community — as well as adoptive families — if their fledgling rescue operation was to survive.

“It’s hard to ask people (for money),” Darla said. “It just amazes me that people across the country would send a donation over the Internet.”

Clark said even small amounts help: \$2.50 is enough to purchase a bale of hay. In-kind donations of hay, grain, supplements, wormer, bedding, smooth wire fencing and other items are also appreciated.

“It’s been a good experience because I’ve never had a mustang,” remarked Coble. “I always figured they were crazier than the devil.”

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