



# History of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation

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The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (TRF) was conceived in 1982 as an organization that would provide dignified, humane retirement for thoroughbred racehorses no longer able to earn their keep on the track.

It quickly became an organization that does much more than rescue horses. Working closely with the New York State Department of Corrections, the TRF established its inaugural retirement facility on a state-owned farm adjacent to the Wallkill Correctional Facility. The TRF program incorporated a state-accredited vocational training course for the prison inmates who would become the horses' caretakers.

The bonds forged between the TRF's needy horses and their Wallkill caretakers have given a new start in life to both the men and the animals. Perhaps even more important than the learning of marketable horsecare skills has been the deeper impact on the spirits of the men who care for these powerful, magnificent, and yet dependent living creatures. Responsibility, pride, respect, and new-found feelings of self-worth have often altered their outlook on other aspects of their lives.

Teddy Roosevelt is credited with having said, "There's something about the outsides of a horse that's good for the insides of a man," and we see the truth of his insight every day at Wallkill.

## HISTORY

The TRF's founder/president Monique S. Koehler, is a New York advertising executive. Her love for animals led Koehler, who is a racing fan, to offer her business and promotional skills in 1982 to the cause of a group of people struggling to rescue disabled and discarded racehorses from tragic ends. Koehler enlisted such horse industry notables as Penny Chenery, owner of Secretariat; Elinor Penna, sportswriter and widow of Hall of Fame trainer Angel Penna; owners Allaire duPont, Barbara Kirkham, and NY State Senator Howard Nolan; trainers Peter Howe and Stanley Shapoff; MIT professor George W. Pratt and attorney William H. Pratt, to serve on the board of directors. With Koehler now in the lead, the organization was on its way. By 1983, through William Pratt's tireless effort, the TRF had been granted tax-exempt status as a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation.

Senator Nolan initiated negotiations between the fledgling organization and N.Y. State for the use of an abandoned 50-acre dairy farm the state had purchased as a buffer zone between the Wallkill Correctional Facility and a new prison. Less than a year later, in 1983, the TRF reached an agreement with the Corrections Department to lease and run the



*Directors Shelby Timberlake and Raymond Roy, Jr. (hidden) with TRF founder-president Monique S. Koehler feeding carrots to the horses.*

Photo: Mary Ratcliffe

farm as a retirement facility for racehorses while training inmates to care for the animals. The TRF farm manager, Jim Tremper (now with N.Y. State), worked with specialists from the state's education department to develop the TRF's modular course in Horse Handling and Care, which is modeled on animal husbandry courses at Cornell University and at community colleges.

This expansion of the organization's purpose from being a humane horse rescue operation to a program which united the rehabilitation of men and animals for the benefit of both proved to be a crucial component of the program's strength and its success.

Much of the start-up money was raised in October 1983, when three of racing's all-time great geldings, Kelso, Forego, and John Henry, paraded on Jockey Club Gold Cup day at Belmont Park in behalf of their less fortunate equine brethren. The trio of champions helped to raise close to \$150,000—donations from people at the race, matching dollars from NYRA, and the proceeds from sales of a print of the three horses created by renowned equine artist Richard Stone Reeves. It was enough to give the Wallkill program a running start.

With the TRF providing lumber and other supplies, inmates completely renovated the dilapidated dairy barn on the site and built paddocks to receive the horses. By 1984 they were ready to welcome Promised Road, the first of the scores of horses that were to find haven at the TRF. That same year, the first paroled graduate of the program was hired by a

Connecticut horse farm.

While several program graduates have gone on to find work on a breeding farm, at the track, and with a Central Park riding stable, the Wallkill experience has shown that the program's more far-reaching impact is on the attitudes and values of the men who have participated in it. Caring for the horses has pierced the hearts of prison-hardened men, releasing unwonted displays of warmth and affection, responsibility, and pride in the renewed health and vitality of their equine charges.

## THE FUTURE

A measure of the Wallkill success story is that other states have come to the TRF asking for similar programs.

The TRF Midlantic Chapter, Greener Pastures, was formed in 1990 and opened negotiations with Maryland's Department of Juvenile Services. When Youth Services International, Inc., was contracted to administer the youth training program at Baltimore's Charles H. Hickey School, the state made the TRF program a component of the agreement. In 1994, the first horses were given an enthusiastic welcome by Hickey's juvenile inmates, who come largely from the Baltimore's impoverished and crime-ridden neighborhoods. Through caring for the TRF's retired racehorses, these troubled young people are discovering within themselves qualities of responsibility, dependability, self-esteem, and respect for other living creatures—qualities that will help them to turn their lives around and re-enter the community as productive citizens.

Negotiations with New Jersey

have been stalled by tight state budgets, but with Wallkill and the Hickey School as bright examples of the unique benefits of working with horses, we hope to continue expansion to other states.

## FUNDING

The tax-exempt Foundation is entirely dependent on public contributions. No outside fundraisers are used. Officers and board give voluntarily and prodigiously of their time, skills, and professional expertise to administer the program. Only farm managers and a skeletal office staff are salaried. Unlike many charitable organizations, the TRF is able to spend virtually every penny of every dollar donated directly on the program.

Income is derived from modest but regular donations from many thousands of racing fans who believe racehorses deserve better than a painful trip to the slaughterhouse when their track careers are over, and on the larger gifts of wealthier supporters. And some of those closest to the program—the Wallkill student-inmates who care for the horses—make contributions from their limited resources.

Annual fund raising events include auctions of stallion breeding seasons, equine art, and racing memorabilia. Summer in Saratoga is the scene of the annual pet parade for dogs only, which enriches the treasury and gladdens hearts.

The industry gives support in a number of ways. Horse people send tack, feed, and medications. NYRA has opened track areas to us for fundraising events. The NJ Sports and Exposition Authority has supported the TRF through special giving programs at the

Meadowlands and Monmouth, and sponsorship of TRF stakes races.

## NOT LEAST—THE HORSES

Registered thoroughbreds with a racing record, free from contagious or communicable diseases, and for which private retirement is unavailable or unsuitable, may apply to the TRF. The owner of an accepted horse must submit a properly endorsed Jockey Club certificate of foal registration transferring title to the horse to the foundation and transport the horse to the facility.

Since Promised Road limped off the van in 1984, scores of horses have come through the TRF gates. Some are champions whose distinguished careers could not protect them from finishing up in a can of dog food. Others are just hard-knocking racehorses who did their best and then had nowhere to go. There are currently 60 horses retired at Wallkill, the Charles H. Hickey, Jr. School, and satellite farms.

**Banker's Jet**, a winner of nearly \$700,000, was near death from starvation and neglect when the TRF found him alone, untended, ankle-deep in a muddy quagmire.

The celebrated **Creme de la Fete** won 40 of his 151 starts, more than the legendary John Henry. Claimed 15 times in his 8-year career, the horse was lucky that his final owner retired him to the TRF.

**Jungle Marsh**, as a 7-year-old Argentinian, suffered fractured sesamoids at Aqueduct but still finished ahead of three other horses.

**Rita's Deal** was a New Jersey claimer of the year.

**Sir Prize Birthday** was retired at 12 after finishing in the money in 109 of an astonishing 206 starts.

**Majority Leader**, his lungs damaged by pneumonia, was running in cheap claiming races when his former groom scraped up the dollars to buy the horse and retire him to the TRF.

The TRF gave these splendid animals and others like them a new career when their racing days were over. Today they are helping to set their caregivers on a right track.

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