If You Hear Hoofbeats...Think Positive!  
An Interview with Colorado Horse Rescue

By Jessica Harris, MS

Have you heard the old medical adage, “If you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras”? Coined by Dr. Theodore Woodward, it refers to prioritizing commonplace explanations for things rather than rare, exotic ones. And while we at GFAS love horses and zebras equally, we took some time to chat with our friends at Colorado Horse Rescue (CHR) about their strategy for rehoming horses.

Founded in 1986 and GFAS Accredited in 2011, the rescue has come a long way in their programs, capacity, and most significantly, in their outlook. In recent years, under fresh leadership and expanded staffing, the rescue has topped 60 adoptions annually and is laser-focused on community engagement and mission-driven programs. In this interview, Sharon Gilbert (Adoption Manager) and Grace Degnan (Marketing Associate) share the vision and strategy that have made CHR so successful in helping horses. The beauty of their approach is that it’s known to be effective, we have seen it work before, a horse among zebras. And therein lies its power- if harnessed well, these accessible and adaptable methods can transform your organization, be it sanctuary, rescue or in between, into one as impressive as CHR. Read on to hear how CHR has done it. (Dialogue has been edited for clarity)

Jess: Tell me a little history about CHR. I can see that the organization seems to have evolved recently…

Sharon: We've been around since 1986. In 2000 we moved to the property that we’re at, so we’ve been there for 20 years now and that 50-acre property allows us to have 60 horses that through various situations end up needing to be rehomed. We are going into our third year with a new ED. We’re really reaping the benefits of this entire history that we have and continuing to grow as much community impact as we can given the pandemic.

Grace: The leadership is huge. The last 3 years we’ve significantly increased our impact in adoption numbers per year, skewed a bit this year due to COVID. I think it also has to do with us looking internally, finding what truly is our philosophy, what truly are our expanded goals outside of hitting numbers. We’ve worked with some other organizations who’ve helped us do some team building work to know how we can really do everything at best practice level so in the end we can change the horse issue on a grander level.

Jess: That’s fantastic. Animal folks are notoriously under a lot of pressure. It’s really helpful to have people who have your back, prop you up on the hard days, and share your vision.

Sharon: We just had one of those pressure situations this week. When we have to make a choice for a horse, a euthanasia decision, we make a conscious effort to physically be there to support each other. Our ability and desire to support each other is really a critical component in handling these tough days.

Jess: It’s so refreshing to hear you say that, I think it helps keep the organization healthy long-term. So, I’d love to hear how you’ve expanded your mission and philosophy. I know adoptions are growing in number, what has made that successful?
Sharon: The significant change was having a position that focused on the community interaction with potential adopters. Previously we’d say “You’re the trainer, you know the horse, why don’t you also handle the potential adopters”. Well, sometimes those skill sets don’t go together. You get so busy training and working with some 60 horses, it’s difficult to get back to people in a timely manner as you’re not actually at your desk much. So that was the first really big “aha”- having a focus there and understanding more about the first face people connect with at the rescue - the adoption manager and the community engagement person. We expanded with Grace’s position in marketing, so our Facebook, Instagram posts, all our stories that go out into community are coordinated. We went from adopting 25 to 60 horses a year right after we made that transition.

Otherwise it’s been an evolution from easy pickings: “Hey you’ve already got horses, you know about the whole thing”, we started to look beyond that. We started looking at people who hadn’t had horses before or it’s been 10 years since they owned a horse and have a new property. We looked at getting horses out in a foster situation. We have gone from 5 horses in perpetual foster to closing in on 15 horses in foster and finding that some of those turn into adoptions! So we expanded our view on horse ownership by asking “How do we get more horses out to the community?”

When people talk about horses at a rescue they create an image in their mind of what those horses look like. I think we’re starting to change that because we’re willing to address that in every way, shape, and form. We do not ask for pity, we do not ask for sympathy, we don’t ask you to be sorry for horses. We ask you to support a dynamic team that is engaging with horses. The vast majority of our horses are riding horses with as many skills or lacking as many skills as “the horses across the road”. Trying to normalize.

Grace: That’s an excellent point. We are very goal oriented in the way of changing the stigma around rescue horses being broken-down, huge medical cases, untrainable. We have quality horses here, that’s what we want to show people that a rescue can be. Focus on the positive. They have an even better future ahead of them, instead of “Oh no, they’re stuck in a rescue”. That’s not the case. They’re coming here, receiving high quality care, any medical they need, working with fantastic trainers, so if you’re adopting a horse from us, you’re getting a quality horse.

Jess: And I think people want to be part of something energizing and positive and…

Sharon: Successful! Pity donations are not sustainable. That's a momentary reaction a lot of times. We’re helping humans as well as horses by taking in horses that are at risk because their owners are at risk. Whether it’s health, a divorce, change in financial status, but they may be well-loved members of the family. Being non-judgmental of those needing our services is important so that we can make them (people) feel confident about the rehoming opportunity.

Jess: One other powerful piece that would be relevant for a lot of our groups, who have a wide variety of missions, are your community programs and education clinics. Would love to hear what you do there.

Sharon: One of our trainers is a fabulous clinician. So literally every month we’d host a clinic. It’d range from all the different ways people are interested in horses, not just horse ownership. We have a horse photography clinic, horse painting, the art of drawing horses. We also invite outside clinicians like our vet or farriers to come and talk to the public. So, it’s
great if you have the resource yourself, but reach out to the people that support you. I think that’s part of the community that you have, and if you can ask them “If I give you a stipend for gas and a $25 Amazon gift card, can I engage you in helping educate people about horses?”.

**Grace:** The benefit of our clinics and the fact we have them every single month is a lot of them are geared toward beginner/intermediate handlers. Those are such amazing resources for first-time horse owners that come to us wanting to own a horse, for us to say, “Maybe you’re not ready right now and don’t have all the knowledge you need to take on a horse, but instead of just turning you away, let’s keep you engaged in our community and help you grow in your abilities, experience level and knowledge. Here’s an actual resource we hold every month.” Creating ways to consistently offer our adopters and community members growth in horse experience and knowledge has been a vital part in creating that community and staying engaged and coming back.

**Sharon:** Find ways to get people on the property to see what you are doing. The clinics get people to CHR on the property where they can experience for themselves if you are well-run organization, if you’re caring. We change something about their perception every time they come on the property.

We also engage with educational institutions around us and provide some services in regards to equine sciences; they come to us and we provide a variety of horses for them to learn how to do various procedures, with hands on experience. Or if somebody is studying equine massage and they need some horses to practice on, we’ll partner with the community that way. We’re able to grow and be valued in the community not just as a “rescue”; we support the community and can be valued as an educational resource as well.

**Grace:** The Leg Up Program really ties into some of our greater goals. This year especially. A big one is to be a major part in stemming the flow of so many at-risk horses in Colorado and beyond by creating real, tangible solutions to the problem at hand. If you are a good horse owner but you’ve run into a financial crisis, that doesn’t now make you a bad horse owner. It just means you’re a human going through a temporary crisis in life and from our perspective, that horse is so much safer if we can work with providers and help that horse stay safe in its home. They don’t need to be rehomed; their person just needs a little help temporarily. Over the last 6 months we’ve been tracking the impact of that program a little more closely and the majority that we’ve helped throughout COVID have reported that they were able to keep their horse and some of them have even paid back that money we supplied as a donation after they got back on their feet.

**Sharon:** And we’ve talked about really examining our language. It used to be called “crisis assistance program”. You had to acknowledge you were in a crisis!

**Grace:** Yes, now it’s called the Leg Up Program, a horse pun of giving a leg up onto a horse. Saying, you just need a boost right now, no judgment.

**Jess:** So cool. I want to wrap up by asking you if you have a favorite adoption story to share with me?

**Sharon:** A recent one was a first-time person that said “I’d like to take some of your least adoptable horses. I want to foster them.” She wanted to maintain a really close link with us.
We said “Are you sure you want to take on a 31-year-old horse that needs this sort of maintenance?” And she said that’s what she was really committed to, going the extra mile. She’s taking an online equine studies course. She does not get financial support from us. She built her fencing, she installed a shelter, we’ve worked closely to coach her on feeding, how to store things. She’s created a loving environment for these horses where they get specialized attention, and for that, I am so grateful to her.

Grace: Another great adoption (see pictures featured) was by two of our volunteers. They had decided to purchase some land in Texas, they had always wanted to be horse owners but just didn’t have the level of experience yet and needed to build their knowledge and abilities. They fell in love with Cowboy and Sundance, two stunning riding horses. One of our trainers worked with them on a weekly basis with these horses. They volunteer at CHR twice a week, so that’s been very helpful for them to understand what goes into caring for horses every day. They became such a big part of our community: volunteers and now adopters. And this morning they loaded up their horses and are on their way to Texas! It was such a great opportunity to partner with these people who always had dreamed of owning horses and we said, “Let’s make it happen”.

Jess: And what are you most proud of at CHR?

Grace: Definitely that community piece. We have so many volunteers and adopters who truly just come out to be with the horses and feel like this is their escape. The positive impact we end up having on people’s lives, that’s what touches me the most.

Jess: I’m touched as well! You’re absolutely a model for others, more than anything in your attitude, that goes such a long way. Harnessing the good part and asking your community to step in, especially for small groups who may not have the resources to hire but can tap into what’s out there, people just interested in helping.

Sharon: I am in the best job of my life, because I know every day this organization can make a difference for a horse. Being able to guide people to a place that could be more permanent. It’s not just about the numbers - the numbers come when you’re doing the right things. Think about where you are and how you’re viewed in the community. Welcome them into your facility and make sure you’re representing yourself well and people know who you are.

Positivity and non-judgment, community engagement, education, and inclusive adoption practices may be common, well-known success tactics. Sanctuaries, transition centers and rescues alike can use these ideas to turbocharge their operations and impact. The unique, emphatic way in which CHR has embraced them showcases the synergy and power they can bring to an organization, increasing capacity for care and maximizing the benefit to rescued equines. In the end, you could say that in their progressive approach, Colorado Horse Rescue is a zebra among horses.

A heartfelt thank you to Sharon Gilbert and Grace Degnan at Colorado Horse Rescue for taking the time to speak with me and for all CHR is doing to help horses in need. If you’d like to learn more about their work or donate, visit: chr.org