



Capacity For Good

A Roundtable Discussion with Laurie Jackson (Executive Director, Happy Trails Farm Animal Sanctuary) & Nancy Turner (Founder, This Old Horse)

By Jessica Harris, MS

For Nancy Turner and Laurie Jackson, sanctuary is a state of mind. Not just a physical place, but a community of support. A trust in the goodness and potential of all animals - including humans. Each of them run powerhouse GFAS Accredited equine and farm rescue groups that have grown not only their care capacity, but their philosophy around how to best serve animals. Their openness to new sanctuary and rescue models was as striking as their humility and willingness to learn. Despite their diverse histories and intake structure, the creativity and flexibility in their approach has allowed them to maximize the impact of their programming for homeless animals. Read on for lively conversation and revolutionary thinking on capacity building for everything from horses to pot-bellied pigs.

Jessica: I want to start by giving everyone a feel for what you guys do: can you give me a little overview of the history of your organization, how the programs have evolved over time?

Laurie: Happy Trails Farm Animal Sanctuary is located in Ravenna, Ohio and our mission is to rescue, rehabilitate and rehome criminally abused farm animals and horses. We do that in cooperation with law enforcement. So, if a search warrant is served, we go in and we provide the expert evaluation of the animals alongside their vet and provide transportation for the animals from the scene. From there we rehabilitate and provide assistance for the court hearings. Once the court case is done we adopt out. The sanctuary part comes in when we can't find a home. Because for us the animal species have a wide span and include farm pigs and cows, it can be hard to find a home that just wants them as a pet. Until they find a home they're safe with us. We'll be celebrating our 20th next year. I came into the organization in 2013 as an employee, and as director in 2016 when the founder stepped down. With GFAS, I feel like we're part of the elite. You feel, when you get that accreditation, you've made it!

Nancy: We started in 2012. I was volunteering at a therapeutic riding program. They kept retiring all these therapy horses, saying "Who wants them?" and I ended up with 2 of them at my private farm. And I felt like I was an embarrassment of riches, like, "Look at these great horses, they just give them to me! I could be anybody!" I looked at how hard they were working. So I pitched to this program: why don't you just keep them? Keep them and retire them, and have them do a different job. Have people come groom them, have them do something else, with reverence for their life of service, because therapy wasn't their first job. They gave me the bum's rush and said "Yeah we don't do that". And I got mad. I thought somebody should do that! My sister said, "Why does everyone think someone else should do their good idea? If it's a good idea then you do it!" I took it as inspiration. So we started as

a sanctuary for retired service horses. Show horses, therapy horses, mounted patrol. Then once you get into it, you see a broader need for horses in transition and rescue. We do mostly owner surrenders, there's another rescue in our state that does a lot of the humane case work. We mostly try to help people who are in a struggle. So it started as really sanctuary-based. We didn't do any adoptions at first. These are old horses, they've had a hard life, we just want them to have a place to land. But what we found with volunteers coming in is that they love them and want to take them home! But you worry that no one can do as good a job as you can. Especially if they've been in hardship. And I know nothing bad will happen to them if I'm in charge. Then the idea of GFAS, that fits my way of thinking, to have high standards and demonstrate that with some external review. Once we got that, I felt so comfortable in the sanctuary end of things. The only way to expand capacity then is to keep expanding, make your program bigger and bigger and more expensive; or you can have this leap of faith, that you if give people an opportunity to love these animals in the same way you do and give them a community of support and embrace them... I no longer see sanctuary as a place, in my mind. I see it as a type of service that the horse needs. That taking care of them in a sanctuary model can happen with an adopter or foster or at our facility. So if you think of sanctuary as a safe place, you don't have to pick a camp. So we evolved some of our programs. It's not all or none, most of us are on that continuum.

Jessica: So how is your intake source affecting your capacity? You each have different sources...

Laurie: There is so much to talk about with that. Our evolution started with our founder recognizing the need to take animals that were part of cruelty cases, farm animals and horses, because cats and dogs were easy. But when there was a cruelty case involving a large animal, honestly they didn't know if it was neglected or not, let alone where to take it if they seize it. So that is how we came to be as an assistance to law enforcement. And as there's been a movement of good, motivated rescues, we've had to be fluid with this. I don't believe in having an empty stall or barn. We can't just wait for the next person to be recognized as having been cruel to their animals. So we had to start looking at how we do this intake when our mission states that it's cruelty-abused animals. We've had to think about capacity and how do we get our animals, because animals are our business.

Nancy: We're part of the MN Horse Welfare Coalition working with law enforcement as a resource to keep horses safe at home. We do micro grants for people in trouble that reach out. Laurie, you stand at the bottom of the cliff when animals fall over and say "They have failed and we are here to pick them up". But the other part of that mission is to stand at the top of the cliff and make sure they don't fall off! I think it's so compatible. Helping an animal at risk is equally important if not more important than the one that has already fallen off that cliff. So, where's your place to step in and solve the problem?

Jessica: So a big part of this has to do with intakes, but also evolving your programming and state of mind along with need. What do you each feel has been the most successful way you've built capacity for care? What has helped you the most?

Laurie: The most successful way for you to increase your capacity is to open your mind to what the industry is saying. To education. To (the idea that) you might not be the only person who can take care of that animal. There's been this movement by the heavy hitters to break

barriers to adoptions. If you listen, open your mind, take that leap of faith to try it, implement it in your organization. That's what happened with us. When we were able to do that, I looked at our numbers, and for 3 years running we adopted out 18 horses a year and the year I really got momentum and started changing some things we adopted out 42 horses and things started to happen! It gives me goosebumps, because an empty stall isn't helping anybody. We increased our capacity, and how anyone can (do it) is to be open.

Nancy: We have a sanctuary for wild mustang stallions that are elderly. There's 20, 7 are blind, that came out a huge humane case and all of them got adopted! But they never moved, because we had a donated farm. So it is a sanctuary, and all of them are also adopted. We do the oversight but they were all adopted, transfer of ownership. In our case, most of our horses are unrideable. So we look at the market of people who don't want to ride. Where do they put that horse if they live in their condo or go to Florida for the winter? You can board it, but you're not fitting in at that barn. If you're at a hunter/jumper barn, and you have the blind Appaloosa that you just love on, you don't fit in when everyone's going to the show or working with the trainer. So what we did is we're up to 10 farms that we manage. For most of them, all the people there are adopters and they pay board and cost of care.

So you can think of that with adoption and providing that ongoing support. Our biggest group is first-time adopters. People say "I'm 55 years old, I've never had a horse in my life but it's my childhood dream." Ok, you can have a horse. You can have 5 of them. We have a place for that if you have the means for that. And we have our Soul Train program. We have a professional trainer that meets with new horse owners in a 12 week course. It's not the trainer working with the horse, it's you working with the horse under the guidance and advice of the trainer. We'll give you 60 days with a trainer, and then take it from there, hire your own- you'll be a more sophisticated consumer with 60 days of support.

Laurie: I look at that and say "We can be that too, we're just at a different point in our journey." That's why being part of GFAS is so exciting to me, it's like being one of the cool kids! I was 32 when I got my first horse and I'm now the director of an organization that oversees the lives of, last year, 42 adopted horses! So there are so many people out there that just need it to click that they CAN own a horse.

Nancy: Yes, that's our brand! People say "Well, I don't have any horse experience" and I say "NOBODY does until you own a horse." I didn't know how to drive a car until I took Drivers Ed and now I drive every day. The only way to get horse experience is to be with a horse - come to our barn, get experience. Just show up. And that's how our volunteers become our adopters, become our donors, become the people who buy their own farms. It's not hard, you just need a path.

Jessica: I've heard this a few times now, that if you give people that doorway way in, it keeps snowballing. So bring them in as a volunteer or first-time adopter and they become something else, another resource. It's inclusiveness and open-mindedness about who can come into the circle, how you create a culture that welcomes and not having a preconceived idea of who can help. I love that, because there's so much potential.

Let's talk about foster, has that helped your capacity?

Nancy: We have about 100 horses in foster. The continuum of foster to adoption for us is just a transfer of ownership. And we always offer that safety net for adopters; that horse can always come back if your circumstances change. So with that, it's made our adoption program bigger. We have our Pasture Prime program for our older horses to go graze for 6 months on somebody's horse property, so that's a short term foster program. If you have grass, I'm unabashed, I go "Wait, how much pasture do you have? You're mowing your pasture?! I will bring some organic lawn mowers in for the summer and help you with that!"

Laurie: For us, it wasn't a very successful program, so I shut it down. It was like boarding and was sabotaging adoptive perspective. So we shut it down temporarily until we could figure it out. The way we have opened it up is foster-to-adopt. The only reason we currently would foster an animal is they say "I want to adopt this animal" and we say "It's part of a court case, so we don't yet own this animal, but if you feel it's a match we will foster-to-adopt." They take the animal as if they were adopting it and when the court case closes out we can complete the adoption. So any rescue dealing with custody and law enforcement, you can take a look at our foster program.

Jessica: That's interesting how you made that work for you Laurie! At Happy Trails, how do your adoptions impact your farmed animals?

Laurie: I think our adoption program is really cross-species. And all our animals are housed on the same property. So if we have someone coming in that wants to adopt a goat...but "Wait, who's that? That horse is beautiful!"

Nancy: Get in the car, kid!

Laurie: Yes, that horse is yours! So bringing someone on the property that's interested in one species often crosses to another species. And it works both ways. But let's take a look at our other animals. Goats, no problem. Sheep, no problem. Chickens, no problem. Cockfighting roosters? Problem. Farm pigs? Problem. The majority of our species though, we don't have a problem with adoptions, it's almost more keeping up with adoptions! You know, I'm a horse person, so I get excited about the equine programs, but part of the reason I'm excited for that is it educates me about the process, which I can then apply to the other animals. One example is the last court case we did. We had 17 pot-bellied pigs, our capacity is 15. But we were looking at assisting a county that had no other place to turn. I'm like, this is what we do. We're going to take them in. And I realized with all this focus on horses, I can apply that focus to pot-bellied pigs. And we adopted out 11 in 2 weeks.

Jessica: Thanks Laurie, I'm hoping that is useful for our farm sanctuaries as well because many of them have some equine species too. Lastly, I want to ask you both what you feel is the interplay between your adoptions and your sanctuary residents?

Nancy: For us, we have some long-term residents. But as I said, for us sanctuary is a level of support, not a specific program with its own capacity. Because we do what we call "adopt in place" at all our facilities, the sanctuary is not exclusive from adoption. Some of our horses that are here long-term are also adopted. For us it's not a separate program but a level of

care and an expectation of the level of service. This is not the technical definition, just our internal one.

Jessica: Thanks for reiterating that Nancy, that's such a unique viewpoint. That bridges this dichotomy that forms philosophically, how you think of it and how you approach it in your mission. Laurie, I know you don't have many animals that are lifelong residents, but do you have anything you want to add?

Laurie: Our sanctuaried animals...they're all available for adoption! We're open to any adoption. We used to have animals we called "permanent residents", I did away with that. They're now called "ambassadors". We will no longer keep an animal just because they're good for tours, etc. We have transitioned to ambassadorship and when they're tired of doing it or when someone wants to adopt them- there will be another ambassador! There will be another animal that's just as sweet and cute and friendly that can represent our organization. And we are going to implement a new program called "Adopt in Place" haha, inspired by Nancy Turner! That's exciting that animals that can't find their forever family for whatever reason, virtually they could have a family too.

Nancy: Exactly! And then the adopter has skin in the game, about decision-making, about their health care, and being involved, but they don't have to have a place for that to happen. And back to your ambassador, the story is still good, the story is better! A long-term resident has an adopter at long last! That story is AS good as the fact that you'll take care of that animal forever, is that you introduced them to someone who would. The distinction between our sponsorship and adopt in place program is that a sponsorship is a recurring donation in the name of a horse. But it doesn't give you any rights or privileges to ownership or decision making. But that same horse, at our boarding rate, you can adopt it!

Laurie: Do you have that program outlined on your website? I'd be really interested in seeing that!

Nancy: No, but I have a flowchart that describes it! Access the flowchart [here](#).

Jessica: I love this!

Laurie: This is what I mean. If people are open to what is being taught. The most exciting thing to me has been this conversation based adoption. Conversation opens up the communication for a potential adopter to be more. To be a supporter, a donor, an ambassador. Especially now when we have this seclusion, communication and community is so important. Community is what we create when we have conversations with people that call or email us.

Nancy: We create a community that supports horses, not a place that supports horses. What are the barriers not only to adoption, but to getting people introduced to this whole opportunity of loving horses? Break down the barriers to access to this. You see yourself in it suddenly: "Oh my god, I could have a horse!" and then you do! And then you have a million! Then you start working for an organization!

Jessica: And then you become GFAS Accredited!

Laurie: Anything is possible; you just have to present those possibilities.

The inclusivity and adaptability at the center of Nancy and Laurie's rescue work presents countless possibilities for helping animals. By bringing people into their circle and building community, they've created a lifesaving network of rescuers and animal lovers alike. Their openness has led to opportunity. For them, capacity is not simply defined by the number of animals they can care for, but their broader capacity for good - and that is far more expansive and inspiring.

We extend a heartfelt thanks to both Laurie Jackson and Nancy Turner for their incredible heart and dedication, and for taking the time to share it with us. If you would like to donate or learn more about their organizations, visit <https://www.thisoldhorse.org/> and <https://happytrailsfarm.org/>.