

# Donkeys find new life at last chance ranch

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Watsonville couple runs nonprofit adoption agency for abused animals

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You may have heard of child abuse, spousal abuse or elder abuse, but donkey abuse?

According to one Watsonville resident, the mistreatment and neglect of these animals is far more prevalent than most people realize.

"You see everything from animals that haven't been fed and are malnourished, to those that have been neglected. For example, their feet have not been properly cared for — and even some that have been beaten," said Kathryn Hayes, who runs Horsefriends Large Animal Rescue, Inc., a nonprofit rescue and rehabilitation program.

Hayes started the organization

with her husband Mark at the couple's 2-acre farm off Larkin Valley Road in 2002 when they decided they wanted to use their land, which had once housed a horse riding and training facility, to help large animals in need.

"Our rescue efforts actually started with kittens that I would foster for the Watsonville Animal Shelter, but we had so much room here that we thought we could use it to help bigger animals like horses, donkeys and mules," Hayes said. "Especially since there aren't many rescue programs for donkeys. We had a lot of connection in the horse and donkey community, too, and we realized that many of the animals have a really hard time."

Currently, the couple is caring for seven rescued donkeys — one of which just gave birth to a newborn male on Tuesday night — in addition to their own slew of horses, miniature donkeys, cats and dogs. Hayes said her neighbors have been extremely supportive of the program and even allowed the couple to expand the program on their property.

Just how exactly does a rescue unfold?

"Well, we get a lot of phone calls about animals that may be in trouble or abused," Hayes said. "We'll travel all over the state to pick up an animal, too."

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Kathryn Hayes gives some attention to a few of the donkeys she and her husband rescued from situations of abuse and/or neglect. The Watsonville couple runs the nonprofit Horsefriends Large Animal Rescue, Inc. at their Larkin Valley Road ranch.

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Once the animal is back at the couple's Horsefriends Farm, the first order of business is to deal with the animal's immediate health or medical needs.

"After that, though, our ultimate goal is to rehabilitate the animal and retrain it so it's fit for adoption," Hayes said. "Our goal is to find these animals good new homes."

Three donkeys — two rescues, Cisco and Cheyenne, and their newborn baby — were recently adopted by a family in Livermore and are expected to move sometime in April.

"It's hard because I get attached to them and they become like pets, but really we want to be like a transitional place for the animals," Hayes said. "I'm pretty picky about who I allow to adopt, though, because I want to make sure these animals aren't going to end up in a bad situation again. I work hard to match the right donkey with the right home."

Much of the "retraining" or rehabilitation focuses not only on the animal's physical needs, but their emotional ones as well.

"With those animals that have been abused, it seems to take a really long time," Hayes said. "When I first got some of these donkeys, they'd run away from me and stay all the way across the yard. I'd have to get down on the ground and sit very still and quiet before they'd even come near me."

Now, when the gentle, big-eared, doe-eyed donkeys see their caregiver coming toward them, they flock to her for pets and attention.

"Yes, you girls are doing so well," she said as she gave a reassuring pet to Jenny, one of her rescues. "She's training to be one of our spokesdonkeys. We take our donkeys to different parades and community events to let people know about the program and educate them on these animals."

While much of the program is rescue- and rehab-based, there is also an educational component to



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This newborn donkey is the latest addition to Horsefriends Large Animal Rescue, Inc. The baby was born on Tuesday night to two donkeys that Kathryn Hayes and her husband Mark rescued. The three animals have since been adopted and will soon be moving to their new home in Fremont.

Hayes' work.

"It's really our belief that a lot of times when these animals end up in bad, abusive or neglectful types of situations, it's because people simply don't understand how to take care of them," Hayes said. "I think people also have misconceptions about what these animals are like. People think they're like horses, but they are different."

It's important for donkeys to trust their caregivers, Hayes said. But that trust takes much longer to build up than with horses.

"Once they trust you, though, these animals can do much of the things that horses can," Hayes said. "You can use them to pack things or pull carts — even ride them. And they're very gentle."

While Hayes said she has seen tremendous success with the animals, the program is not cheap to operate. Both Hayes and her husband, who also have three teenage daughters, have second jobs and work from home.

"We rely solely on donations to keep the things up and running,"

Hayes said. "So far, we've put a lot of our own money into it, but we knew we'd have to spend money to get results — results that we could show people."

Now, the couple is looking more to the community to help with costs, supplies and labor.

"Any type of donation, whether it be money, material like fencing, or if people just want to come and help out, we'd really appreciate it," Hayes said.

As a certified nonprofit, all donations are tax deductible.

"I know that we can't help every animal out there — that's just too overwhelming to think about," Hayes said. "But if I can save even just a few here and there, then I feel like I'm really doing something positive for the planet."

For more information on the program or to make a donation or schedule an appointment to see the animals, call Horsefriends Large Animal Rescue, Inc. at 588-9493 or check them out on the Web at [www.horsefriends.org](http://www.horsefriends.org).