

## A lifeline for abused horses



Story by Kathy Engle Photos by Mario Aguilar

## Equine Voices

For many years, the Animal League of Green Valley and other area organizations have helped homeless cats and dogs find new homes, but horses have had no formal advocacy organization in this area.

Until now. Equine Voices Rescue & Sanctuary Inc., a non-profit organization whose founder and her husband moved to the Jumpin' Jack Ranch in Elephant Head in August, is focused on saving mares and foals used by the pharmaceutical industry to make the hormone replacement therapy drug Premarin.

They aim to "serve as a voice for the many equines who cannot speak for themselves."

Karen Harkson, who has been involved in animal rights organizations for several years, established the sanctuary with her husband Randy, who works at the Tubac Golf Resort.

The 10-acre property has large corrals for the horses and where the Harksons plan educational events, such as horse clinics. They also plan to market natural products for horses including those for hoof care and massage.

### 'Wonder drug'

But back to Premarin. Karen explained that pharmaceutical giant Wyeth has been marketing HRT under the name Premarin since the FDA approved it in 1942.

Many women and doctors considered Premarin as no less than a miracle drug in alleviating the painful symptoms of menopause. What many do not know is that Premarin comes from the urine of pregnant horses, who are subjected to cruel conditions, Karen said.

Wyeth signed contracts with hundreds of farmers, most of them in western Canada, to breed thousands of horses each year, she explained. According to a recent NBC News report: "Pregnant mares were confined to narrow stalls for more than 20 hours a day, for five months at a stretch, all the while strapped to cumbersome urine collection devices."

"Their foals were usually sent to auction, along with their mothers" if their foal production lagged, the report said.

At auction, they are bought for recreational use or frequently purchased by "killer buyers who send them to feed lots to fatten them up for slaughter to sell in Europe and Japan."

### Demand dropped

The demand for Premarin dropped dramatically in 2002 when a women's health initiative study tested HRT and found that women taking the Premarin-type medication were found to be suffering from higher rates of heart attack, blood clots, breast cancer and dementia.

The demand for the Premarin product dropped sharply, and by the end of 2003 Wyeth canceled the contracts of more than half the Premarin farmers.

"Pharmaceuticals have cut production of Premarin by 50 percent," Harkson said.

And while this may be good news in the long run, there are an estimated 20,000 stallions, mares and foals without homes, she continued.

Some are rescued by individuals, she said, while others are saved by non-profit groups, such as Equine Voices, but the majority are now sent for slaughter for human consumption.

### Saving the horses

The Harksons are working with other equine advocacy groups around the country to save whatever horses they can from the Premarin industry and find them good homes or places with organizations such as 4-H, school youth programs or other organizations.

They also take donations from those who wish

to sponsor a Premarin horse.

The couple moved from California in August. Since then, Karen has been using her sales and marketing skills to work on behalf of horses on several fronts:

- Securing sponsorships and adoptions for Premarin horses.

- Spreading the word about Premarin.

- Writing to Wyeth Pharmaceuticals to let them know about opposition to Premarin.

- Oppose events that exploit or abuse horses and several other steps.

"Financial support to Equine Voices Rescue and Sanctuary will help us rescue more Premarin horses, continue our educational efforts, work to stop horse slaughter and find permanent homes for the horses in our care through our adoption program," Karen said.

"Through education we are confident we can enlighten the public about the horrors behind the Premarin industry and horse slaughter, and be a catalyst for change so these noble animals may finally live a life without abuse, pain and suffering," Karen wrote in describing the sanctuary's mission. "Education and rescue are our most important goals," said Randy. "We want to educate the public about other ways of working with horses and about the relationship that comes about with love and caring."

The sanctuary is managed and operated by volunteers, who help Karen and Randy support the operation.

Recently, the Harksons took in several "Pony Skin" foals, slated for slaughter so their skin could be used to cover handbags and other items and are at work finding homes for them.

A recent visit to the sanctuary revealed immaculate corrals and a half-dozen, friendly curious and obviously happy horses.

The Harksons are now recruiting volunteers for their organization to help with horse care, maintenance and feeding. They also welcome visits from horse lovers who want to come and enjoy the experience of interacting with horses.

### Instructional clinic

On April 8-10, 2005, they plan to sponsor a three-day "Reach Out to Horses" clinic conducted by internationally known horse trainer Anna Twinney.

Karen, who grew up with horses, has held several positions in the corporate world.

In 1994, she quit her job and backpacked around the world for 18 months, primarily in Third World countries.

"As I traveled, I saw how so many animals were mistreated and realized it was time for me to follow my heart," she said.

"I knew I had to follow my path and leave the corporate world behind. I began by volunteering for a wild horse sanctuary in California, becoming part of the grass-roots movement to help wild horses."

During this time, Karen learned about the plight of horses in America and about the Premarin industry.

"I knew in my heart that some day I would have a rescue and sanctuary to help the horses and to educate women about Premarin and natural alternative to Premarin," she said.

The Harksons' Web site offers detailed information about the sanctuary and its needs and they have a brochure that explains their programs. To learn more about the sanctuary and its work, go to [www.equinevoices.org](http://www.equinevoices.org), e-mail [info@equinevoices.org](mailto:info@equinevoices.org) or call (520) 398-2814.

Volunteers are always welcome and even if you just go to see their beautiful horses, it will be worth the trip. Call as a courtesy before you come.

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**Top:** Randy and Karen Harkson play with some of the abused horses who recently found a home at the Harksons' Elephant Head ranch. **Middle:** Carrot time is a highlight of the day for the horses. **Bottom:** Karen Harkson fulfilled a lifelong dream by founding Equine Voices Rescue & Sanctuary Inc.