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EQUINE VOICES SPEAKS OUT FOR PMU HORSES

By Dana Cox

When the trailer door opened and the four foals emerged, they must have sensed they'd landed a new lease on life. Their journey could easily have ended at the slaughterhouse, not the ranch in Arizona where they now played and roamed about freely. But Karen Pomroy, a business graduate who had worked in sales and marketing, decided it was time to take a stand.

Karen volunteered at a horse sanctuary in California for four years before leaving corporate life behind to buy a 10-acre ranch in Green Valley, Arizona. "That's where I learned about the Premarin issue," says Karen.

Premarin (PMU), an estrogen-based hormone replacement therapy developed in the 1940s, is made from pregnant mare's urine. Most women don't know about the controversial operation behind the manufacturing of the product or the health problems, including breast cancer, that studies have associated with the drug.

"They certainly don't know that 90% of the babies go to slaughter, and the mares when they're done with them," explains Karen sadly.

Karen went online and found a farmer who had lost his contract with Premarin manufacturer Wyeth Pharmaceuticals (declining Premarin sales have forced a number of farmers out of business). A family member of the farmer was trying to place the foals before they were sent to slaughter. "She told me there was this one baby who was big and ugly and no one wanted him," recalls

Karen. "He was definitely going to go to slaughter because he was part Clydesdale and he would gain a lot by the pound. I said, well, I'll take him, and one foal ended up being four. From there, one thing led to another and here we are."

Karen established Equine Voices to save PMU horses in August of 2004 and received her non-profit status just six months later. A self-described health nut, she knew she wanted the rescued horses at her ranch to benefit from as natural a lifestyle as possible.

"I learned about herbs and equine massage and the natural modalities at Return to Freedom horse sanctuary and that opened up the door to caring for my own animals with natural care."

Karen's approach helps address some of the unique issues that come with rescuing PMU mares. The horses can be 16 or



The original four who started it all. From far left: Spanky, Deuce, Gullivar and Bella.



Karen Harkson shares a moment with Lightening, who was born at the ranch and later adopted out with her mother.



Gullivar, all grown up and healthy, has fun with some visiting children.



Little Miss encourages her baby, Joy she takes her first steps. Karen rescued the pregnant Little Miss, a former PMU mare, from a Texas auction, where she was on her way to slaughter.

17 years old by the time they arrive at her ranch, and they've been constantly pregnant since the age of two or three, hooked up to urine collection tubes in their stalls for about ten months of the year.

"The PMU horses are different than any other domesticated horses or mustangs because of the way they've been treated," explains Karen. "They've suffered years of abuse in a pee-line. Most of the people who care for them don't treat them well. They make them stand on concrete for days at a time. When they trim their feet, they use a tilt table, and they withhold water because they want the urine to be concentrated. A lot of the PMU mares have been traumatized around the head and sometimes it takes months to get a halter on them."

Karen and her dedicated group of volunteers work gently and slowly to build up the mares' trust. Though Karen says a few may only ever be suitable for companion animals, many do go on to become wonderful pleasure and competition horses, showing in everything from dressage to eventing.

When the horses are ready, Karen puts them up for adoption. She carefully screens applicants and charges only what she pays for the horses.

"It costs me over \$1000 a horse to get them out of slaughter and down here. When I adopt a horse out, the adoption fee goes into a special account so I can rescue another horse. We're responsible for 49



Equine Voices' volunteers shower love and attention on the horses while helping with day-to-day operations.

Photos: Rick McCallum, Southern Arizona Photography

"The Journal of the American Medical Association reports that women treated with Premarin (estrogens derived from horse urine, Wyeth) alone were 39% more likely to have a stroke during a 7-year follow-up period in the Women's Health Initiative, compared to women treated with placebo. The Women's Health Initiative had already shown that estrogens combined with progesterone increased the risk of heart disease, breast cancer, stroke, and potentially fatal blood clots."

— Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine.

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horses right now through our ranch here and affiliate ranches. My hay bill alone is \$4000 a month."

That number is about to grow, since nine of the mares came to the ranch pregnant (as well as with a foal at their side). To raise additional funds for feed and healthcare, Karen runs a sponsorship program (\$50 a month to sponsor a horse) and natural horsemanship clinics, and has even hosted a series of holistic classes covering everything from equine nutrition and saddle fit, to barefoot hoofcare and animal communication. Her clinics are usually sold out in advance, and she's sometimes surprised at who shows up.

"I have a lot of skeptics come but when they see the results, which happen almost immediately, they start to believe there's something to this, working with horses in their own language and stuff. I had one cowboy who's been doing natural training and he said he tried to get his friends to come but they're old school. But maybe they'll see him doing something with his horse and they'll be more open minded down the road."

In the meantime, Karen is working to create awareness about the PMU horses and the alternative hormone replacement therapies and treatments women can use. Her website offers information and suggestions so women can feel empowered about their own health and wellbeing.

She dreams of owning more land so she can rescue more horses. "If I can save 125 horses in a year, imagine what I could do with 100 acres!" She looks forward to a day when PMU farms are a distant memory and horses are safe from slaughterhouses. "The only way this is going to end is if slaughter ends. So I do what I can everyday in the meantime."

Numbers don't lie

30,000 – The number of horses slaughtered in the U.S. alone in the first four months of this year. The number goes up if you factor in Canada and Mexico

14% – The increase in horses slaughtered over the same period in 2005.

What you can do:

- Support HR503 – the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act. Write to President George Bush at president@whitehouse.gov or go to www.house.gov to find your representative.
- Write to the president of Wyeth Pharmaceuticals and boycott their products.
- Write to the Secretary Gale Norton, Department of the Interior, exsec.ios.doi.gov

Resources:

"Screaming To Be Heard: Hormone Connections Women Suspect and Doctors still Ignore"; Elizabeth Lee Vliet, M.D. 1995. M. Evans and Company. New York.

"The Greatest Experiment Ever Performed On Women: Exploding the Estrogen Myth"; Barbara Seaman. 2003. Hyperion, New York