



HOLDING HER HORSES

Terri Stemper makes her mark, one foal at a time

By Karsen Price ~ Photos By Susan Whitfield

Terri Stemper stands quietly in the stall, watching two of her newest equine charges rustle around her. The week-old foals — orphans, both of them — suck on their lips and tongues, looking for all the world like human infants in need of pacifiers. The tiny horses sip tenuously from buckets of milk, brown eyes pondering the person in their presence — this human being who has mysteriously appeared in their lives and is now filling the role of their missing mothers.

Welcome to Dream Equine Therapy Center, located on Stemper's five-acre farm in Rock Hill, S.C. It's a place where the impossible becomes possible; where nightmares become dreams come true; and where one woman doggedly tries to right a decades-long human wrong. >





Terri Stemper has turned her love of horses into an impassioned plea for the humane treatment of nurse mare foals.

FORGOTTEN FOALS

At first glance, Stemper doesn't appear to be the fireball type. She is tiny, blonde, and soft-spoken. Beneath her quiet demeanor, however, lies a steely resolve that includes saving 30 to 40 foals this spring. Even if it wipes out her energy level *and* her bank account.

Stemper, a native of Wisconsin, has been involved with horses since she was 7. She moved to the Charlotte area in 2005, after working for several years in Lexington, Ky. As a registered nurse, she spends her days caring for people; at night, she takes care of horses. A *lot* of horses.

Stemper's mission is multifaceted. For one, she'd like to shed light on a heartbreaking reality known as "nurse mare barns" and found within the multimillion-dollar Thoroughbred racing industry. These barns, often located in Kentucky, provide — for a fee — mares that have recently given birth as horse "wet nurses" to Thoroughbred racing foals

insured for millions of dollars. Nurse mares are bred solely for their milk production; the nonpedigree foals created in the process are byproducts.

"The million-dollar, high-class foals get the milk," Stemper explains. "The nonpedigree foals are considered the lower class, and these are the ones that are left to starve."

In worst-case scenarios, the mare is separated from her foal immediately after birth and leased out to other barns — for a variety of reasons — over a period of weeks to six months. The original foals are left to struggle without the milk and care they need.

Day-old foals are often carted away to be auctioned off, while others are sold to businesses that profit from the sale of "pony hide." At auctions, Stemper has stumbled across foals that, at two days old, are already dying from neglect, although others are surprisingly vibrant and resilient. "An auction is no place for a day-old foal," she says. >



KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE

How You Can Help

Dream Equine Therapy Center accepts all types of donations, including the following:

- Gift cards or certificates from feed stores, or department stores (for raffles)
- All tack
- Horse supplies such as supplements, de-wormers, hoof moisturizer, finish line electrolytes, fly spray, brushes, medicated shampoo, etc.
- Horse medications/veterinary supplies
- Hay and grain (pelleted, Purina), Alfalfa pellets, rice bran, etc.
- Gas cards (for traveling to collect foals)
- Helmets (all sizes)
- Horse clothing, blankets, sheets, especially foal-sized
- Buckets, water troughs
- Office supplies and furniture
- Any barn or fencing materials
- Horse trailers, four-wheelers, or tractors for farm maintenance

Monthly sponsorships for individual horses are also available.

For donation details, visit www.dreamequinetherapycenter.org.

ONE-WOMAN TASK FORCE

"I learned about nurse mare barns back in 2000, when I worked as a vet tech for a large equine hospital in Lexington," Stemper explains. "I have seen people blindfold mares and take their babies from them as soon as they are born, and then lead in other foals for nursing."

An average nurse mare farm produces 50 to 100 unwanted foals per year, and Stemper says there are hundreds of these types of farms in existence. While not all nurse mare barns are guilty of inhumane treatment, the problem is widespread and, because the industry is largely unregulated, has slipped under the radar for years.

In addition to building awareness, Stemper's goal is to save as many foals as possible. "There are only a handful of rescue organizations that help these foals, because it is so expensive," she says. She works closely with two of those organizations — Last Chance Corral, in Athens, Ohio, and Eagle Hill Farm, in Culpeper, Va. — to purchase foals. She transports them home, where she teaches them to drink milk from buckets and to eat grain. She then finds the foals safe foster and adoptive homes.

A long-term goal for Stemper's Dream Equine Therapy Center includes using rescued

The rescued foals in Terri Stemper's care are afforded room to thrive as they await adoption.

horses on her farm to offer emotional support and wellness therapy to terminally and chronically ill people. She has found that her patients respond positively to hearing stories about her horses, and she believes that bringing patients to interact with them can be even more beneficial.

"Again and again, patients would ask me to tell them about the horses," she says. She soon came up with a dual concept for Dream Equine Therapy Center — a place that can heal horses and humans, together.

AT HOME ON THE RANCH

This spring, Stemper's modest barn is virtually bursting with foals. The number is constantly changing, but at the time of this writing, she had 13 babies to care for. "Our goal this year was to take in 20 to 30 foals over the whole foaling season, and we took in 27 in three weeks," she says. "We still have one month of foaling season left."

While she's saved horses for years on a personal level, Stemper says this is her first concentrated rescue effort. During one successful week

WORDS THAT INSPIRE TERRI STEMPER

Reaching For The Stars

An old man walked up a shore littered with thousands of starfish, beached and drying up after a storm. A young man was picking them up and flinging them back into the ocean. "Why do you bother?" the old man scoffed. "You are not saving enough to make a difference." The young man picked up another starfish and sent it spinning back to the water. "Made a difference to that one," he said.

— A Parable, Author Unknown

in March, she secured homes for 10 foals. Since then, she's placed an additional five in foster and adoptive homes.

Stemper's out-of-pocket expenses include the costs of buying, transporting, and feeding the horses ... and it isn't cheap. In one busy week, her operating costs were roughly \$4,000. As a result, Stemper, along with a dedicated following of supporters, from neighbors to local veterinarians to friends to strangers, is always raising money for the cause. This year, the Center has hosted a wine tasting, held a ride-athon at nearby Anne Close Springs Greenway, and is in the midst of a raffle for a weekend at a condo in Myrtle Beach, S.C. In April, Stemper received nonprofit status for the Center.

Stemper is well aware that her crusade is one most people would never consider taking on. "I have a friend who likes to tell me, 'I know a great brain surgeon,' " she says with a shake of her head. "Others say, 'Terri, you can't save them all.' " Stemper tries to content herself with saving as many as possible, doing

what she can to "make a difference" to each one.

Among the horses Stemper has rescued, a few stand out. She found "Taz" at an auction when he was just two days old. The horse was so weak that she and a friend put him in the back of her car and carried him home like a puppy. Now 9 years old, Taz is an interesting cross of breeds. Stemper refers to him as a "Paint-App-Walker mix," meaning he is part Paint horse, part Appaloosa, and part Tennessee Walker. He is also a calm, affectionate pet with one blue eye and one brown eye. Noting that he quickly learned basic skills, Stemper says he is a delight to ride and jump.

With a free hand, Stemper reaches out to gently scratch one nurse mare foal's fuzzy back. The foal, named "Phoebe," stretches her brown neck appreciatively. Only six weeks old, Phoebe is already especially responsive. "There is nothing like the joy and bond of raising an orphan foal," Stemper says. "They are the best horses I have ever owned and the easiest to train ... because they are so willing to please." **TCW**

ToLearnMore

For information, visit www.dreamequinetherapycenter.org, or call 803/980-8422. To foster or adopt a foal, e-mail detc@comporium.net.



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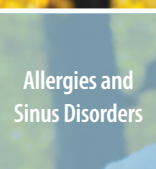
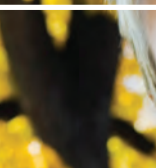
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