

## THE PARCHMAN ANIMAL CARE and TRAINING (PACT) PROGRAM

By Stanley Brooks, Director of Agricultural Enterprises



Stanley Brooks, Scott Biggers, Rick Wheat and Rob Biggers

The Mississippi State Penitentiary is home to a new program for our state and a tested one for the field of corrections - The Parchman Animal Care and Training Program (PACT). The program acquires horses that are deemed untrainable or have been abandoned, trains them and then returns them to the world as productive citizens. The best part of the program is that it accomplishes the same results with the offender participants.

These programs have broad support in the public, generally because people like horses. These programs save horses lives and removes them from less desirable circumstances. Many of the horses are rescue animals, meaning they have been surrendered to animal rescue organizations when owners could not afford them or when they weren't serving the purpose for which they were purchased. Humane societies have learned that these animals are more easily placed if they are trained. Many others are received from the Federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) when they have demonstrated themselves to be obstinate. Once the horses are trained they will be adopted out, provided to law enforcement and to MDOC's K-9 departments. Horses are now able to be depreciated on tax returns making them more appealing to related businesses.

The program is modeled on ones that have been successful in several western states. Two of the states that have operated a horse training program, Wyoming and Colorado, have seen dramatic reductions in recidivism among participants and available employment for them upon release.

In a prior interview, a Wyoming DOC spokesperson for the program described the reason for the program's success.

*The Wyoming State Honor Farm established in 1931 and located at Riverton, Wyoming, uses wild horses for inmate rehabilitation. Its program, started in 1988, is the oldest horse program in the United States prison system. You may ask, "How can wild horses help these inmates become better citizens? When you place wild horses gathered off the open range with inmates who have no previous horse handling experience what happens?"*

*The wild horse, with its large size and power, will not tolerate being mishandled and therefore demands respect. Horses cannot be coned. They only understand honesty. Wild horses off the open range have been free with no restrictions beyond those of survival. This is very similar to the inmates. They operated outside the law and beyond restrictions. Society wants these inmates to live within the law. The Honor Farm supervisors have found that the wild horse program plays a big part in inmate rehabilitation. Inmates working with wild horses learn that through honesty, respect, trust, patience, and teamwork, even an animal such as the wild horse will respond in a positive way. Inmates that are released after working in this program have a higher percentage of success in the outside world.*

In Colorado, Brian Hardin, the program's supervisor for the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC) says "The animals take the place of the family unit while they're locked up." He adds that the recidivism rate for horse trainers is half the national average for all offenders.

Demand for saddle-broken mustangs from the CDOC is high. Prison adoption fees are \$1,025 per horse, compared to about twice that for outside adoptions, said Fran Ackley, the BLM's wild horse and burro specialist. At Colorado's East Canon facility, about 75 saddle-trained mustangs are adopted each year.

In Mississippi, the PACT is operated under the Agricultural Enterprises Department and is supervised by brothers Scott and Rob Biggers. The Biggers are both professional horsemen, with Scott being a long time rodeo participant and horse trainer, and Rob a long



time gaited horse trainer. They are getting the program up and running on a contractual basis.

Scott Biggers has elicited the support of nationally known horse trainer Rick Wheat (developer and patent holder of the Noavel Headstall System). Mr. Wheat conducts training seminars nationwide and hosts his satellite TV Show "On the Road with Rick Wheat." He received three awards from the Humane Society that stated that "The Rick Wheat Noavel Headstall" is The Most Humane Safety Device for controlling an un-ruly horse. He received one award from a division called AR-TEX Animal Welfare Association located in Arkansas & Texas, one from the (National) Blue Bonnet Equine Humane Society Located in Texas, and the last in Alberta, Canada.

The MDOC program was first conceptualized in April of 2008; and, the agency is in a great position potentially to have a self-funding treatment program with a proven record of success.

The program provides training in farrier science, horse training and basic veterinary care. This combination of training provides the offenders with an advantage in the potential \$100,000 a year farrier job market. Many farriers know how to shoe horses if the animals are already subdued and cooperative. If the animals are not docile, a farrier will go to the next client. There is so much work available; they have no need to work with uncooperative horses. Currently, if every certified farrier could manage 400 horses, only half of the available work would be performed. This doesn't include the 300,000 wild mustangs on BLM property.

The offenders in the program (all A custody inmates that volunteer for the program) will be capable and qualified to catch, subdue and shoe a horse, thereby increasing the demand and payment for the services they can provide. According to Scott Biggers and Rick Wheat, the typical horse owner is going to be interested in the competency and humanity of the farrier, not any criminal history he might have.

Participation in the program makes the offenders more dependable. It also gives them the hope of a brighter, productive future through the various certifications they can receive. The program used at the

Mississippi State Penitentiary leads to a three tiered certification - farrier, horse trainer and basics of veterinary science. The offenders currently in the program (six starting out) are working with eleven horses.

The offenders are in the program five days a week for 8 hours per day. During that time they groom, walk, ride and all the while train the horses. They learn the "language" of the horse and to read their movements. Mr. Wheat said he prefers working with inmates because they are focused on the lessons and jobs at hand. "They are not preoccupied with plans for the evening or any of the other concerns other students have. They are all about the horses and developing the bond with them." He, as well as Scott Biggers say they would hire any of the offenders in the program. If he wants to hire them, he is going to be up against some real competition. There are out of state ranches and feed lots that are already requesting workers. This is in addition to the other industries that employ horses, such as trail rides, equestrian equipment and tack sales, large stables and many more.

"This is a program," says Wheat, "that puts back into the bucket instead of taking out of it."

Rick Wheat's satellite TV Show "On the Road with Rick Wheat" Dish Network, Channel 9411 (University House broadcasted by Northern Arizona University) 8:30pm Central Time, Time: Wednesday - Sunday Nights

