

≈ RESCUE ≈

# AN OBLIGATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

*A tribute to Forever Morgans, the founding organization of the Morgan rescue movement; providing salvation in the face of despair.*

By Susan Overstreet

*The man didn't know why the old horse caught his attention.*

*He was bay, maybe 15 hands. He had what appeared to be a left hind sock, but the mud caking his fetlock left only the promise, nothing more. He stood quietly; not in the corner, not in the center of the pen, a pen teeming with terrified horses, choked with dust, deafened with high pitched whinnies, stinking of sweat.*

*The man had worked the sale for years, every Monday. Rain, snow, sleet; heat so smothering it shimmered on the hard-packed ground. He had seen a hundred thousand horses pass through, nothing more than numbers on hips; some of those hips still round with plenty, some jutting out like the breastbones of the chickens processed next door.*

*He had long since stopped seeing them as individuals; stopped wondering about their stories, stopped envisioning their next journey. He was not a sentimental man. He could not afford to be.*

*Still, there was something about the old bay horse. He glanced up and again, the bay was looking at him; dark, quiet eyes tracking his motions. It unsettled him, left him oddly off balance. He felt the intimacy of the connection and rejected it outright. It was not part of their arrangement; the pact of efficiency which moved the old horse out, leaving the man to fill his place with the next, and the next, and the next.*

*He walked up to the bay and despite his intention, fully against his will, stopped for a moment to look back at him, meeting his unblinking gaze for as long as he could. Angry now, he yanked the horse's halter and struck his flanks, yelling at him to move on, up the ramp, down the road, fulfilling his end of a Faustian bargain.*

*The old horse walked off, dignity in every footfall. There was an elegant curve to his neck, a prick to his well-shaped ears. His tail arched slightly as he loaded the ramp, and this time, he did not look back.*

*The man moved on, robotic in his tasks, disengaged with his charges; not kind, not unkind.*

*Later that night, he would stand in the shower, letting the dirt, the filth, the despair and the memory sluice off him. He would think about his own dreams, lost now in years of bitter living and unbidden, the memory of the old horse would come back to him. "Morgan," he would think, "He was Morgan." A frisson of guilt would cut through him when he remembered his slight cruelty, the last intimate contact the bay would have with the man. It was a cruelty he did not understand at the time and did not fully comprehend for all the years to follow.*

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**RIGHT PAGE:** Samac's Last Moment: Our poster boy, "Sam" is a typey, beautiful Morgan who had spent quite some time as an Amish driving horse. His owner sold him to Forever Morgans, rather than run the risk of selling him through the New Holland auction.





**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Arborwind Yabba Dabba Doo: When acquired by Forever Morgans, “Yabba” had been passed through seven owners in the space of just a few years. He was uncertain, fearful and had lost his trust in people. Adopted by a wonderful family “Yabba” soon relaxed and became the favorite mount for friends and family, teaching beginners the joys of riding a good Morgan horse; Regatt’s Rainbow: Our accomplished driving horse shows off his new found water skills, relaxing with his lovely adoptive owner; Rocky Illuminator: Stunning “Rocky” was an exhausted, thin, fearful horse when he was rescued from a kill pen in 2013. Fortunately, his adoptive owner saw the softness in his eyes, the elegance in his bearing and the promise of his talent. Today, “Rocky” is a showstopper, winning the hearts of all who see him, and an exceptional ambassador for the Morgan breed.

### SLAUGHTER...

It is one of those words which sounds as horrific as the action it describes; cold, savage, and unsparing. It is the fate which awaits nearly 100,000 horses in America each year, every year. The horses are sold at auction in the United States and shipped for processing to Canada and Mexico, the meat then sent to Europe and Japan. Tragically, the transport to the slaughter house is often the most devastating step in this brutal journey. The discussion regarding equine slaughter is deep, wide, and fraught with opposing opinions; strangled with emotion. It is a discussion for a different day, but one which we as an industry urgently need to have.

Horses wind up in auction lots and kill pens for any number of reasons. They are the victims of financial distress, indiscriminate breeding, age, infirmity, outlived usefulness. Were one to spend a day at a livestock auction, at a “New Holland” or a “Sugarcreek,” the emotional impact would be substantial. It should, perhaps, be a recommendation for any of us privileged to breed or sell a horse. Were we there during a sale, we would watch for the Morgans, as instantly identifiable as sunlight; stamped through and through with the look and bearing of the original.

Here is the stocky little chestnut. “Lambert,” our preservationist observer would think, “way back.”

Here is the dark bay; necky, stretchy, fine legged, and despite our internecine squabbles, unmistakably Morgan.

Here is the black, heartbreaking as he parks out for the guy who never asked; terrified in the spotlight, finding comfort in the familiar.

Here are the broodmares, low in their back, ribs sprung; silent testimony to a life given in service.

Here is an aged beautiful bay; gorgeous, curvy, kind, his full dark eyes filled now with tension.

Here is a yearling; gangly, his foreleg turned out, sold without

papers. Disposable in his breeder’s mind.

And here are the road horses. Bred to be show stock, nearly every one. Their papers will leave you drop jawed as the prefixes and familiar names are read. You remember, oh so clearly, watching the liver chestnut gelding in a park harness class years ago. You close your eyes and the brown mare stands again under the regional spotlight, in-hand banner worn proudly around her gorgeous two-year-old neck.

He has trace marks now on his shoulders and flanks, his right foreleg is misshapen from injury. She is thin, hips showing the shadow of bone, angles where curves should be. Their heads are lower than is their wont, their spirits subdued under the burden of hard work, unforgiving surface, and kind but practical hands who have viewed them as farm labor.

Every hip number tells a story, and many of those stories will end in tragedy.

This story, however, is a story of hope, of triumph over tragedy. It is a story about the extraordinary efforts of a trio of women; women whose passion and determination has changed the outcome for nearly 500 Morgans, both grade and registered. It is the story of 15 years of fierce advocacy, solid business management, and deep personal sacrifice. It is a story of agreement, of disagreement, of heartache, and of triumph.

It is the story of Tricia Jumonville, Chris Pennington, and Suzanne Edmonds.

It is the story of Forever Morgans; the oldest of the Morgan specific rescue organizations, and the foundation from which several other marvelous Morgan rescues have sprung.

Begun in 2005, Forever Morgans, (colloquially known as “FM”), started with the realization that many Morgan horses were winding up in severe circumstances; kill pens, disbanded breeding programs, family horses no longer affordable, Amish harness horses

## RESCUE ≈ AN OBLIGATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** JW Here I Am: And here he is indeed, looking every inch his illustrious breeding. “Hero” had a career as a harness horse prior to being sold to the Amish, where he used to draw a buggy. Blossoming in the knowledgeable hands of his loving adoptive owner, “Hero” is now going beautifully under saddle and happy to share his “celebration cake” with family and friends; Master Merlyn: “Merlyn” has gone from rescue to ribbons. Many rescued horses go on to compete successfully in the ring, while others become therapy horses, trail horses, and beloved family members.

sent to auction. Determined to help, the women established an FM group on the Internet; the beginning of what would eventually become a robust, highly regarded 501(c)3 charitable enterprise.

From the very start, FM was designed to be fiscally responsible, rigorously managed and completely transparent. The organization has no physical facility, but rather, a strong network of providers; people who function as auction bidders, foster facilities, quarantine management personnel and outreach ambassadors. Their goal is simple; to rescue at risk Morgans regardless of circumstance, and to place those Morgans in lifetime homes, with a contract which ensures that their future is secure.

FM rescues animals from a variety of sources, including auctions, kill pens, other rescue organizations, and voluntary surrender. In addition, the organization has developed outstanding relationships with many in the Amish community and will often work directly with owners who would typically ship Morgans to auction.

FM is funded entirely by donation, adoption fees, and the sale of promotional items. All revenue generated is used for the purchase, transport, boarding, and medical expenses of rescued Morgans. In addition, FM will work to identify unregistered horses known to be Morgan, and to provide those horses with the security of registration papers.

Should an individual choose to adopt from FM, the process is rigorous, with full due diligence done to ensure that the horse(s) in question will be going to a safe, stable home. The contract specifies the right of first refusal to FM should the adopting party wish to rehome for any reason. Any Morgan adopted carries significant breeding restrictions, with exceptions made on a thoughtfully evaluated, individual basis. An adoption fee is charged for every horse, (apart from “special needs” horses) to ensure that the person adopting is both committed to the adoption and is financially responsible.

Every horse placed by FM is fully vetted, has passed stringent quarantine if advised, and has been carefully observed for behavioral traits and adaptability. In addition, horses represented as riding or driving animals have typically been evaluated and all feedback on training level provided. Past show and breeding records are provided if available.

The charity also cares for “special needs” Morgans, defined as those animals who may have suffered a physical injury, are emotionally unstable, or simply require specialized care. These horses are provided without an adoption fee and with a comprehensive background check for owner/animal suitability.

The overarching goal of the organization is to ensure that every Morgan they touch can live their life out without fear, risk, or uncertainty. This goal is made possible by their firm adherence to policy, rigorous discipline, and unflinching insistence on adopter preparation. Their success rate in adoptions is among the highest in the industry, and the “happy ending” tale of many of their Morgans well worth celebrating. A quick look at their website or social media pages will show FM rescues (many pictured here) returning to the show ring, teaching new riders the ropes, acting as stunning breed ambassadors, and in many cases, the most beautiful “pasture ornaments” one could imagine.

Today, FM remains the passion of the original founders, with the addition of three board members: Deb Jondahl, Sheila Christian, and Amanda Morning. The six principals are joined by a sprawling international network of volunteers and supporters, forming the backbone of this remarkable organization. With no thought of personal reward, hundreds of people have donated their time, money, sweat, and effort to the rescue of Morgan horses they will never meet, never lay their hands on, never pat at the end of a long day.

Every good business has a plan; one year, five years, ten years down the road.



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Regatt's Rainbow: Our "water baby" has a pedigree which reads like the Waseeka dynasty. He is royally bred, incredibly talented and simply delighted to be back in the ring, collecting blue ribbons and many admirers along the way (photo © Shane Shifflet); Northdreams Freedom: She is simply beautiful and she came to Forever Morgans, as do many others, with little more than her name and a small scrap of paper stating that "she is said to drive." Drive she does, and with feminine flair and spectacular Morgan beauty. By D Bar J Uriah x Chester April Dawn, the gorgeous nine-year-old mare is all that one could ask in a companion and a competitor.

Still, were you to ask the founders of FM what their fondest hope for the future would be, their answer would be simple: that they go out of business for lack of Morgans at risk. It is a big hope, an audacious dream, tough to keep imagining when reality knocks so harshly at an open door. But it is not impossible, and every single one of us has a role to play, roles worth a deep discussion.

If we are breeders, large or small, we need to understand that the life we create is our responsibility. It is our responsibility whether the resulting foal is the antithesis of our dreams or walks on stardust. It is our responsibility from the foal's first steps to his or her eventual placement, and many times, it is our responsibility beyond that date.

If we are owners, we need to think long and hard before sending a horse to auction. The days of the top-level show and breeding sales seemingly behind us, the high-volume auctions pose substantial risk to consigned horses. Think carefully before passing the responsibility off to an agent, or consider your action justified as your horse "is likely to get a great home." Rather, assume your horse is likely to go from a life of comfort and privilege to a life of hard work as a valued, but disposable member of an agrarian society. Assume your horse may wind up in unknowledgeable hands, assume that those hands will in turn pass them on to a future which grows more dangerous by the day. Assume your horse may eventually ship in a crowded, filthy, stinking van to a brutal butchering facility in Canada or Mexico. Assume the worst, because for many Morgan horses, the worst becomes reality.

The good news, however, is that we can change the equation. We can breed with discretion, we can register every foal born, we can carefully vet potential homes, and we can prepare advance directives in the event we are no longer able to care for our animals.

As an industry, we can also step up in several critical ways, beginning with the basics of creating a better market. For example, the Morgan breed has a growing presence within the Amish community, and many of the Amish are quickly becoming astute breeders and trainers. In addition, several major sales are now

heavily attended by the Amish, and, in certain instances, managed by them. Given the buying audience, many of the horses sold will become heavily used road horses. This is not a pejorative statement, it is simply a statement of fact. If we do not want our Morgans used as work animals, we need to create a different dynamic. We all benefit from a market for show, breeding, and recreational stock which is valued for purposes beyond road work. Sending our show horses to up and coming Amish trainers, welcoming Amish exhibitors at our shows, purchasing breeding and show stock from Amish farms, all help contribute to an environment of mutual respect and reciprocity. No one wins when a beautifully bred, extensively trained Morgan is run through an auction and sells for pennies on the dollar. The basic tenets of supply and demand are as true with horses as they are with any other product. We should be producing a number sufficient to keep the market demand high and the supply chain robust. They should be trained, presented, and maintained as benefits their value. Each of us, Amish and English alike, has a vested interest in restoring balance to our market and value to our stock.

As a breed association, the AMHA has launched two valuable initiatives to help protect registered Morgan horses. The first is an outreach effort specific to the Amish community and spearheaded by long-time AMHA Registrar, Erica Eulau. Erica now attends several auctions managed by Amish professionals and staffs a table filled with resource material concerning the AMHA; foal registration, transfers, end of life notification, and so forth. Erica serves as an invaluable "face" for the association and reports that her interaction with the Amish Morgan community has been a source of great joy and bilateral value.

The AMHA has also developed an exceptional program designed to help protect registered Morgans in the event of unforeseen circumstances. Called "Full Circle," the initiative is modeled after a similar program offered by the American Quarter Horse Association and provides individuals the opportunity to create a "safe harbor" for Morgans they have bred, owned, cared



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Jellico Colors And Honors: “Joey” is pictured with his girl, Lauren, at the Lexington Horse Center, this July; “Mina” and “Storm”: Part of a large herd sent to auction, Mina went into labor in a crowded holding pen, and the foal, Storm, suffered injuries when stepped on. Forever Morgans was contacted to effect an emergency rescue and mare and foal were quickly placed; Adventure’s Miss Ritz: By Cydon’s Mr Aristocrat and out of a Tedwin Topic daughter, “Miss Ritz” is bred in the purple. She is now looking for a loving family, ready to give years of enjoyment and reward in exchange for the privilege of loving her.

for, or simply admired. At no cost and with minimal effort, a person can call the AMHA and ask to have a Full Circle profile created for any living Morgan. Their contact information will be attached to the horse’s record and should the animal need rehoming for any reason, the registered owner or agent can ask the association if there is a Full Circle profile. If one has been created, they will be given the contact information of the interested party and at their discretion, can reach out to them regarding the horse in question. Full Circle enjoys the support of not only FM, but other leading rescues such as Morgan Safenet and Solitude Morgan Horse Rescue.

There is no obligation on the part of either party and the AMHA plays absolutely no role in the outcome. This is a wonderful tool which can be used to protect and provide for a treasured animal, and one which should be widely embraced by the Morgan community. Full details on the program may be found at <https://www.morganhorse.com/registry/full-circle>.

And speaking of full circle, we return once more to our appreciation for the rescue organizations, of which FM was the first, but certainly not the last. There are several ways in which the Morgan community can aid their efforts, including financial contributions, donations of feed, veterinary care, and transport. Estate planning is one of the easiest methods of assistance, remembering to include the charity as a beneficiary. The organization is always in need of quarantine, boarding, and foster partners, so if adding another beautiful face to your collection is a possibility, your generosity will be repaid handsomely with the knowledge that you helped save a life. Looking for a gorgeous lesson horse? Go meet poster girl Adventure’s Miss Ritz, lovingly cared for by one of the Florida-based FM foster homes. Need promotional items for your club or show? Check out the beautiful calendars, books, shirts, and totes featuring the organization and its wonderful story.

Please visit the website of Forever Morgans. You will find

comprehensive information regarding their history, charter, organizational structure, and financial status. You can also find dozens of heartwarming stories and photographs of Morgans once at risk, now cherished by their owners and partners. The organization maintains a very active presence on social media, links for which are as follows:

ForeverMorgans.org  
<https://www.facebook.com/Forever.Morgans>  
 ForeverMorgans@hotmail.com

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There is magic in the Morgan horse; deep, mysterious, and wonderful. We are enchanted by their beauty, drawn to their elegance, and intrigued by their spirit. Our partnership with them is a privilege and it is a privilege which carries profound responsibility. We may not always be in control of their destiny, or of our own, but we can certainly support those who stand in the breach:

Ready to protect.

Ready to rescue. ■



*In loving tribute to He’s A Heartbreaker (Centerpiece x Glory Edition by Futurity’s First Edition), and with deepest thanks to Merriehill Farms, Gerry Rushton Stables and as always, Stacy Hennessy. It truly does “take a village.”*

(photo © Casey McBride)