

March 2021 - Ramona Couple Provide Forever Home for Retired Thoroughbred Race Horses

Written by courtesy of Ramona Sentinel
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Rescuing horses after their racing days are over can be an expensive proposition, but Ramona residents Sherrel and Maggi Heath have found a way to support the upkeep of nine retired thoroughbreds and two other horses using income from a thriving equine and canine supplement business.



The Heaths enjoyed the company of horses long before they ventured into racing them and opening Sher-Mar Enterprises.

They founded the company in 1990 to provide a treatment for joint pain and arthritic conditions in mostly horses and dogs. A short time later, Sherrel Heath said, friends and acquaintances lured him into the race horsing arena, one race at a time.

“I’ve always been enamored with horse racing and so I bred a couple of mares and I raced a few of my horses at Del Mar, Hollywood Park and Santa Anita,” said Sherrel, who grew up poor in the foothills of Virginia and Tennessee and rode neighbors’ horses for pleasure.

In his youth, Heath helped earn extra money to supplement his father’s earnings as an appliance repairman. The young Heath occasionally worked on tobacco farms and hay fields in his hometown of Bristol, Va.

“I did not live on a ranch or farm but they were around us,” he said. “When you grow up like that, that’s what you did and, of course, go to school.”

Most of the horses the Heaths have now are thoroughbreds that he bred and raced and brought home and retired.

Thoroughbreds typically race for a half-dozen years or so if they stay sound and healthy, but

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their lifespan can extend 30 years or more, Heath said. After their useful life on the track is over, many of the well-trained thoroughbreds are sold at auction. Some are bought by rescues, but others are sent to Mexico where they can be sold for profit, and some are sent to slaughterhouses, or as Heath says, “who knows where.”

The Heaths were determined not to let that happen to their former racehorses, so they brought the horses to their 8-acre ranch near Creelman and Jean Ann Lane to let them live out the rest of their lives. The Heaths lovingly refer to their aging horses as “pasture ornaments,” since they spend most of their time hanging out and grazing in their spacious corrals. But friends also stop by occasionally to ride two of the horses.



The Heaths met in La Mesa in 1978 while Sherrel was selling a condo conversion and Maggi, formally known as Marguerite, was handling the escrow transaction. They each have 35 years of experience in their fields, Sherrel, 78, as a real estate agent and broker, and Maggi, 68, as an escrow officer.

It was through their mutual love of horses that they ventured into a sideline business. Sherrel Heath said he had been giving horses owned by himself and friends a yucca powder to treat their joints and arthritis, and saw big improvements in the animals as a result. The Heaths had relied on yucca, which had been sold extensively throughout the United States for that purpose for a number of years.

“We were buying it commercially and I decided to find out exactly what it was, where it came from and why it was so effective,” he said. “I did six to eight months of research. Then I decided I was going to start selling the yucca product myself.”

Heath discovered that the particular type of yucca plant they were using grows mainly in the American Southwest, from Baja California into California and Arizona. Yucca has long been known to be an anti-inflammatory and has been shown to improve the efficiency of the digestive system, he said.

As time went on, new ingredients for the treatment of arthritis in animals came on the market — glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate.

“Those ingredients are huge now, but those ingredients were not on the market then,” Heath

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said. “Those ingredients became more popular throughout the ‘90s and I was selling some of those ingredients as well as the yucca to horse owners.”

In 2000, after experimenting with ingredients and their effectiveness, Heath formulated Fourflex, which he calls a complete joint supplement. The powder contains yucca, glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate, MSM and vitamin C combined with a base of stabilized rice bran.

He developed a process of buying select ingredients and hiring a contract manufacturer to blend, package and label Fourflex. While declining to specify revenues of the business, he said he sells the product to catalog companies, distributors, feed stores and also online at fourflex.com.

One of Sher-Mar’s regular customers is Blue Apple Ranch off Mussey Grade Road in Ramona. The nearly 300-acre property is a sanctuary for abused and neglected horses, some of whom the owners say have been previously harmed or are old and worn out. The ranch is home to 70 horses, many of them ranging from 25 to 30 years old and some as old as 38.

Adrienne Holmes, daughter of Blue Apple owners Lloyd and Lynn Wells, said they have been using Fourflex for six years and have been impressed with how well it works. She said lame horses have shown improvement in their ability to walk after consuming the powder mixed into their grain

“We’ve tried so many different things and had different vets come out,” Holmes said. “Compared to any others we’ve used this is superior. I believe the product works and it has worked for our horses over the years.”



Fourflex is geared primarily to horses, but the Heaths sell smaller containers of the product to dog owners.

Income from the business has helped support the maintenance of his thoroughbreds and other horses, Heath said, adding he enjoys working and having the flexibility to set his own schedule.

“I’m my own boss and I work out of my house,” he said. “If I want to go play golf, I’ll play golf. I can regulate my own time. When I started this business I realized I wanted to get more into this

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business and I moved out of the real estate brokering business.”

Heath is aware there are other rescues and organizations that take in ex-racehorses throughout the United States. He said many of these off-the-track thoroughbreds can be retrained and make excellent riding horses, show horses and jumpers.

“It’s difficult to raise the money to care for a large rescue operation — there’s a lot of good people who try and want to,” he said.

Bringing his own thoroughbreds home is the right thing to do, Heath said, recalling his mom’s words, “If you own them, you better take care of them,” in reference to his pet dogs.

“By bringing them here we know what their fate is and we know they won’t go to auction,” he said. “We prefer to take care of them so we don’t have to worry about them.”