


# [A CLOSER LOOK AT] Gentle Giants Draft Horse Rescue

The nonprofit organization—aimed at helping larger equines with its four Rs of rescue, rehabilitation, retraining and rehoming—has helped save hundreds of horses from slaughter or uncertain futures.

By Anna I. Sochocky



Christine Hajek founded Gentle Giants Draft Horse Rescue in 2005, and now the organization sits on 135 acres in Mount Airy, Md., with another 100 acres nearby for retired horses.

A photograph of two horses running in a grassy field under a clear blue sky. On the left, a white horse is running towards the right. On the right, a dark-colored horse is running towards the right, slightly behind the white horse. The background shows some trees and a fence in the distance.

# A broodmare too old to produce. A failed racetrack prospect. A chronically lame work horse.

Every year, thousands of horses like these are sold at public auctions in the United States, exported to Canada or Mexico, and slaughtered for human consumption.

Draft horses and draft crosses are even more valuable to kill buyers because of their size. Auctions can be a death sentence for these animals—unless they are fortunate enough to find a home at Gentle Giants Draft Horse Rescue in Mount Airy, Maryland.

## Herd-Centered Nirvana

Gentle Giants facilitates the rescue of draft and draft-cross horses from potential slaughter, abuse and neglect, and the organization promotes the benefits of using these mounts for trail riding, competition or pleasure.

A sign constructed of worn horseshoes marks the entrance to an equine nirvana, where horses enjoy 135 acres covered with lush, green pastures.

Horses with heads weighing as much as 200 pounds nod in the sun, their eyes half-lidded and hind hooves cocked. Gentle Giants staff and volunteers bustle between paddocks, shepherding stacks of labeled plastic buckets to hungry recipients. The activity might be frenzied, but volunteers greet each horse with a kind voice, a pat and maybe an ear rub.

Today 17 full-time staff members and 200 volunteers share the organization's vision, with some working in the barn and others in the office. But Gentle Giants began as a hobby before becoming a passion and obsession for founder and CEO Christine Hajek.

Hajek, who grew up on a Thoroughbred and warmblood breeding farm, didn't ride a draft horse until she was in her mid-20s. But after one ride on a Clydesdale, she was hooked on their calm demeanor and sweet dispositions. "Plus riding a draft horse is like riding a couch," she says.

In 2001 Hajek bought an old Belgian gelding named Elijah at an auction house, which opened her eyes to the plight of the horses there, many of which were heading to slaughter. Hajek found the horse's seller weeping outside his stall, thinking the buyer was a "meat man."

PHOTO COURTESY GENTLE GIANTS DRAFT HORSE RESCUE



ANNA I. SOCHOCKY PHOTO

The formerly fearful Nellie, a Haflinger-Belgian cross, has found confidence thanks to Gentle Giants Draft Horse Rescue and her new trainer Lauren Bognovitz.

“My mom ran a breeding farm of higher-end horses, and I grew up being taught the idea that the horses at sales were trash,” says Hajek. “When I was at a sale, I saw Elijah. I bought him on an impulse. He ended up being a perfect angel. I realized that if there’s one, there is another. You have to find them.”

After purchasing Elijah, Hajek searched the internet for a draft horse rescue where she could volunteer but came up empty. So she formed her own non-profit organization, Gentle Giants Draft Horse Rescue, in 2005.

## Rescue, Rehabilitate, Retrain, Rehome

A retired firefighter who once implored families to plan an escape route in case of emergency, Hajek devised a simple exit strategy for the horses Gentle Giants buys at public auctions: outbid the kill buyers.

“Every single time we attend an auction, we typically buy between seven and 15 horses,” says Hajek. “We’re looking for horses that are in such deplorable condition that it would be doubly cruel for them to make a trip to slaughter. The last sale we went to we purchased 20 horses, five of which we had to euthanize the next day. We

purchased one horse with a fractured pelvis. Another horse was blind. One horse was in its 30s and in the late stage of Cushing’s disease. We may go three times one month and then not again for two months. I kind of like it that way because it keeps the kill buyers and the brokers on their toes.”

In the case of a severely emaciated, sick or lame horse, euthanasia is the kindest alternative. “Some horses are purchased, and we know we’re going to euthanize them, but they are not going to be slaughtered,” says Hajek.

Most Gentle Giants horses are rescued from sales or auctions. A small number originate from animal control

and law enforcement agencies, and the organization receives a few surrendered by private owners. Taking a horse from a private home is a last resort, and coaching an owner can help prevent them from using the rescue as a crutch.

But rescue is just the first step. A long road of rehabilitation follows once horses step on sanctuary ground. Because the health status of arriving horses is unknown, each stays in quarantine for a minimum of 21 days upon arrival, during which the animal receives one-on-one attention from an assigned volunteer.

A veterinarian and a farrier examine each horse. A bloodwork panel is run to establish a baseline and inform a

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treatment and deworming protocol. With a herd of more than 100 horses, veterinary, dental and farrier costs add up quickly.

Retraining is the third step. Gentle Giants staff and volunteers evaluate the horses’ capacity and education, both on the ground and in the saddle. A gift from the Gretchen B. Mobberley Family Trust helped purchase 105 acres in nearby Woodbine, Maryland, ensuring that each rescued horse has a place to live out its days if rehoming is not an option.

But ideally the last step for a Gentle Giants rescued horse is to be adopted. The organization’s adoption policies are intentionally vigorous. Potential owners must complete a thorough application, open their intended “horse home” to a site visit, submit to reference and background checks, as well as demonstrate rider and caregiver skill.

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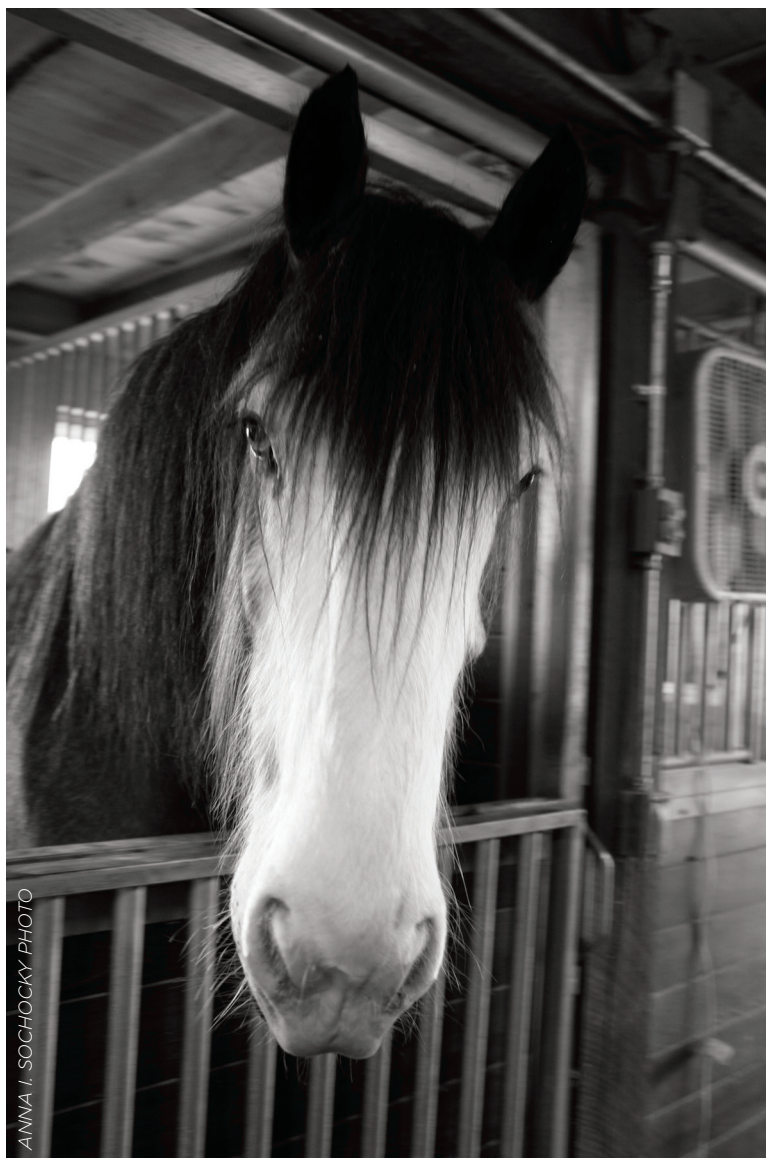
Most prospective owners come to Gentle Giants to see a horse they first viewed online. In the majority of cases, the chosen horse and the eager prospect connect, but in instances when desire runs afoul of reality, Gentle Giants staff play matchmaker between horse and human.

When volunteer and novice rider Nancy McKeown fell in love with a young Quarter Horse cross named Sundance, she put in extra effort to become a good fit for him. Sundance, now 4, was rescued by Gentle Giants when he was less than a month old. He'd begun life as a nurse mare foal, been orphaned and then abandoned by his breeder.

Recognizing her limitations in the saddle, McKeown enrolled in an intensive riding program to become a competent rider and upgraded her fitness level.

"Sundance is amazing," says McKeown. "He is kind, gentle and loving. He is eager to learn, picks up new ideas and concepts quickly, and retains the information. He gives 110 percent of himself. He is full of heart and makes my world a better a place."

Nellie, an 18-year-old Haflinger-Belgian, was unable to be haltered safely or handled by a veterinarian or a farrier. She feared anything and everything in her new world.



ANNA I. SOCHOCKY PHOTO

The equines that arrive at Gentle Giants Draft Horse Rescue are first rehabilitated with veterinary and farrier care before they are retrained and rehomed.

Lauren Bognovitz, a lead staff member at the rescue, worked with Nellie.

"Nellie's had a hard life, and given her old reactions to the world around her, we knew that she had some extensive trauma to work through," says Bognovitz. "We started clicker training to improve her quality of life. She took to it in just a few sessions."

Nellie blossomed, and soon she was trotting across poles, investigating an orange pylon, and playing soccer

with her nose. Last year, Bognovitz began fostering Nellie with plans to adopt her.

"The rescue wouldn't have adopted her out if I hadn't expressed interest, given her complicated history," says Bognovitz. "After a few months of working with her, it was obvious we were two peas in a pod."

Hajek's original vision for Gentle Giants was to offer seven horses for adoption. Since the organization's inception, they've adopted out hundreds of horses. Elijah, the first draft horse Hajek purchased, lived at the rescue until his death at 26. And Hajek hopes she can inspire even more people to get involved with local horse rescue.

"If you're great at ground work maybe you can volunteer some time

helping them out and getting the horses trained so that they're more likely to get adopted," says Hajek. "Just pitch in because there is a huge workload to share, and we should all take part in it." 🐾

#### LEARN MORE:

For more information about Gentle Giants Draft Horse Rescue and to view a list of horses available for adoption, visit [gentlegiantsdrafthorserescue.org](http://gentlegiantsdrafthorserescue.org).