

Difference Maker

Marylander Coyne works to help horses, humans at Sykesville TRF facility

By Teresa Genaro. Photographs by Anne Litz

About 30 miles west of Baltimore sits a horse farm. Its handful of equine inhabitants hail from across the Mid-Atlantic: A Virginia-bred, a West Virginia-bred, a couple born in Maryland. The men who take care of them hold coveted positions, selected from a pool of applicants. Overseeing them is a woman with decades of equine experience.

It could be any one of a number of Maryland horse farms at which horses are born, raised, and trained, at which they learn the job that might turn into a lucrative racing career. But at this farm, the horses aren't young, and they're not the ones doing the learning. They're the teach-





Program director Judi Coyne keeps a close eye on the work and horse care at the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation's farm at the Central Maryland Correctional Facility in Sykesville, which also includes classroom work with the Groom Elite Program.

ers and the men are the students, hoping to learn the skills that might lead to careers in the horse industry when they've completed their sentences at the Central Maryland Correctional Facility.

Program director Judi Coyne has spent most of her life working with horses. The Virginia native grew up going to the races with her father, who'd sneak her out of school without telling her mother.

"When I was really good, he'd take me to the paddock," she reminisced. "I'd be really quiet when he bet, and it was thrilling to watch the horses run."

She didn't just watch horses; she rode them, too, earning her Horsemasters Certificate from the British Horse Society in the early 1970s after attending a three-month residential program held in Maryland. As she got older, she contemplated a career working with horses but deferred to the wishes of her father, who said she could "do horses after college."

She majored in psychology at Old Dominion, unsure what she'd do with that degree, then took what she called "one of

those 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' quizzes."

"It said I could work with parolees or as a probation agent," she said dryly. "I said, 'Hmm. I don't know about that.'"

Yet it's the path that she took, and before long, she realized that she'd found her calling.

"I loved helping people find a different way of life," she explained. "It's such a fine line between those who make good decisions, and those that happen to have a bad situation or make bad decisions."

She spent 30 years working in Maryland's criminal justice system and right about the time she'd decided to retire, she received a fundraising flyer for the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation's farm at the James River Work Center, one of the TRF's 10 facilities at correctional institutions.

"My dad claimed a horse once, and of course it never won," she said. "We ended up retiring him and gave him to my uncle at his farm. I thought that's what happened to all horses."

Intrigued by the TRF program, she discussed it with Gary Maynard, Maryland's secretary of public safety and correctional facilities. She learned that her home state would follow in Virginia's footsteps and establish a Second Chances horse farm at the Central Maryland facility in Sykesville, at which inmates would learn how to groom and take care of horses through the Groom Elite program. Men reaching the end of their period of incarceration can apply to the program; those accepted spend six months learning about equine care in the classroom and in the stable. Students who successfully complete the course earn a Groom Elite certificate.

In the meantime, Coyne had gotten back to horses. College, marriage, a child, a career, a divorce, a re-marriage didn't make finding time for horses easy, but as her husband put it to her, "You love it and you're not getting any younger. You should get a horse."

Nearly a decade before learning about Second Chances, Coyne had begun competing again, but before too long, she



had the opportunity to add yet another dimension to her experience with horses, as she was asked to work temporarily to help get the Sykesville program off the ground, her experience with both criminal justice and horses an unlikely but perfect combination.

Then she hesitated.

"I'm going to get attached to the horses there," she thought. "I'm about to retire. It's almost an hour from where I live. If I can't stick with it, maybe I shouldn't get involved with it at all."

So retire she did, but it was the retirement that ended up being temporary.

About a year ago, Coyne got a phone call. The training coordinator at Second Chances was leaving, and Coyne stepped in, working with the inmates on a volunteer basis. Volunteering turned into a contract, and Coyne now works part-time as the program's coordinator.

"When I got the call, I thought, 'Let me go see it,'" she said. "It's such a beautiful place, so serene, and it's such a wonderful program. I said, 'I guess I'm no longer in retirement.'"

The program is staffed by low-risk offenders, the goal to teach them a skill that will help them get a job when they return to their communities.

"Employment reduces recidivism," Coyne declared. "That's Number 1 to me. If you can keep the men employed, you're going to keep them out of trouble."

Her background working with parolees helped her quickly see that though the program on the farm was, as she put it, "remarkable," it was missing an important element.

"There wasn't a second step," she observed. "The men go through this great program, but there's got to be a bridge

between walking out the door with a great education and getting a job in the industry."

Mary Ann Fisher had been working with the men in the program teaching them equine massage; her role was expanded to help develop a work-release program, so that program graduates could go from Sykesville, to work release, and then back into the community.

Not all the education takes place on the farm; Coyne described a field trip the program took to Laurel Park as an eye-opening experience for the men.

"They had never been around horses until this program," she said. "They don't really know that what I'm telling them is true: they are well trained and they know so much."

"When we did the tour of the racetrack and they saw the grooms doing their jobs, they realized that the jobs they did on the farm are just like the jobs they are doing at the track."

"They said to me, 'We know [all the equipment] they used, we know how they used it; we do it exactly the same way. We can do this job.'"

At this point, Second Chances doesn't have a mechanism for keeping in touch with its graduates, to see whether they go on to lives in the horse industry, but developing that program is one of Coyne's priorities.

"We've just started. It's a gap," she admitted. "But because of my background, I tell the men that I'll talk to their probation agent, and we help them develop resumes, both for careers in the horse industry and more generally."

She does know that 13 of 15 graduates of the program have not returned to prison.

Of the four men who graduated in January, three have said they'd like to work with horses. But Coyne acknowledges that their training likely isn't enough. While Maryland doesn't forbid felons from having a license to work at the track, cases are decided on an individual basis. She also acknowledges the stigma of being a former convict.

"In my opinion," she said, "the crime doesn't identify them. It's who they are at the time they walk through the doors to go back into the community."

The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation's mission is to take care of retired racehorses, and Coyne clearly cares about the horses as much as she cares about the humans in the program.

"The cool thing about this program is that when you donate to the TRF, you're supporting horses, and we love horses," she said. "When you donate to Second Chances, you're also making our state better, you're changing the life of men, and you're reducing crime."

When Coyne went off to college, she knew that she'd come back to horses later in her life. She had no idea that she'd end up working with inmates and the formerly incarcerated. She couldn't have dreamed of spending her days combining both of her passions.

"The best part of my day is watching the men bring the horses in and take them out," she said. "Remember that scene in *Seabiscuit*, when the jockey was limping and so was the horse?"

"It's kind of what I get every day. Our horses are a little bit injured; they can't be retrained, and this is their forever home. The guys are a little bit injured, too, in a different way, but they're so good for each other." ❀