



Brook Hill Farm in Forest, Va., combines a thriving horse rehabilitation program with an equine-assisted learning program for at-risk and disabled teens.

>> WHAT IT IS: Brook Hill Horse Rescue and Therapeutic Riding Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit horse rehabilitation center in Virginia that also hosts United Neigh, an after-school program for disabled and at-risk children. It's also accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries.

A CLOSER LOOK AT: **Brook Hill Farm**

By combining equine rehabilitation and outreach for children in need, this Virginia facility works double duty on good deeds.

By MEGAN BRINCKS
Photo courtesy of JO ANNE MILLER

After purchasing a 60-acre property in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains in 1991, Jo Anne Miller quickly realized that if she didn't want her husband to fill the pastures with cattle, she'd better find some horses to dot the landscape.

A chat with her veterinarian, Ronald Fessler, DVM, convinced Miller to start taking in the occasional horse in need of pasture time to heal from various injuries and caring for them alongside her own three horses. Though she'd never intended to run a rehab facility and had been skeptical about feasibility at first, the endeavor continued to snowball as the years progressed, and in 2001, Miller officially established Brook Hill Horse Rescue and Therapeutic Riding Center in Forest, Va. In the 13 years since, they've rehabbed more than 350 horses.

"Lameness [can take] six months to a year to heal, and people don't want to deal with that," said Miller. "When you go to an auction, the skinny ones [who are sound] get bought, so we decided to focus on the lame horses. They were the ones who were slipping through the cracks."

Brook Hill also takes in rescue cases from county seizures, and its staff has rehabbed performance horses of many disciplines, from grand prix jumpers to a western reining horse. After the horses come sound, they're slowly worked into Brook Hill's youth program to get back in shape and teach young riders new skills. Then the team veterinarians and staff evaluate the horses and decide what might be the best fit for a second home for each horse.

Miller explained that a grand prix jumper might never jump 5' fences again, but he could easily jump 3' without a problem and clean up the ribbons at local shows.

"These horses can go back and have a useful life at a lower level," she said. "I'm trying to place these horses in homes with kids who will work hard, but maybe they can't afford the best horse."

But the horse rehabilitation program is only half of Brook Hill's mission—the program puts just as much emphasis on helping humans in need.

"We added the children because when you have this many horses, you need a labor force," Miller joked.

In reality, the children she refers to are lucky members of Brook Hill's "United Neigh" Equine Facilitated Learning program for at-risk and disabled youths. The after-school program is designed to help kids ages 12-18 develop self-confidence, personal responsibility, teamwork and workplace skills. They also receive tutoring and must keep their grades up in order to spend time with the horses.

"They have to earn a way to be a part of it," said Miller, who grew up around horses but focused on education and disabilities in college. "They have to do their farm chores and get good grades."

Students come twice a week year-round, and the proof of the program's quality is clear: United Neigh participants have a 100 percent graduation rate from high school.

And Miller's programs don't stop there—she also provides internship experience for college students, manages more than 600 rotating volunteers, runs

4-H and Pony Club groups, organizes training for Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International instructors and works toward a higher level of equine education in the community.

Miller and one other full-time employee, Assistant Executive Director Tracy Russler, handle the majority of the administrative duties. Brook Hill also employs two part-timers, but the majority of the work on the farm, including the veterinary and farrier work, is done by people volunteering their time.

"I'm surprised at how much support we have," Miller said. "It's a really good surprise. We're just so busy trying to do the programs right. We call ourselves the Brook Hill family, and I think that's why we have so many volunteers. We definitely are family-oriented." 🐾

>> LEARN MORE: Check out the Brook Hill website at brookhillfarm.org.

>> GET IN TOUCH: Email Executive Director Jo Anne Miller at secretary@brookhillfarm.org or call (540) 586-7432.

>> GET INVOLVED: Brook Hill welcomes monetary donations of any amount, but they also keep a list of supplies needed on their website. At the moment, the program is seeking donations of horse books for the children's library and horse models (Breyer, etc.) to use for teaching. In addition, they're always looking for good volunteers (and they can offer college students class credit for internships) and adoptive families for rehabbed horses.

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