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Chesco woman rescues endangered wild Nokota horses

Christine McGowan fell in love with rare, wild, endangered Nokota horses, which trace their bloodlines to the days of Sitting Bull, who bred them as war ponies. She created a Nokota Preserve on her 13-acre farm in Chester County.



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Christine McGowan, 51, greets two of her formerly wild Nokota horses — Moon (left) and Katchina — on her 13-acre Nokota Preserve farm in Birchrunville, Chester County.

CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer

by Dan Geringer
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On a windy autumn afternoon seven years ago, Whitney Jaeger rode her horse Leo down Flowing Springs Road in Birchrunville, Chester County,

to meet her new neighbor, Christine McGowan, hoping to make a friend.

Jaeger was holding her daughter, Lia, 4, who wasn't waiting for Halloween to wear her Supergirl costume with a cape that flapped in the breeze.

As mother and child approached on Leo, McGowan noticed that their horse was unusually calm, unperturbed by the wind and the fluttering cape and the unfamiliar farm.

She recalls thinking, "Either this horse is 100 years old or there's something different here."

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McGowan was surprised by Leo's serenity because the rescue horses on her farm were far from calm, including her riding horse, a thoroughbred mare named Sweetie, who was so unfocused and hard to handle that McGowan called her "the orangutan."

Last week, the two horsewomen were hanging out at McGowan's barn, as they often do, remembering their fateful first encounter.

Jaeger said, "I was thinking, like, 'Hey, you! I'm horsey. You're horsey. We should be horsey together. Want to be friends?' "

McGowan laughed. "I said, 'That's nice. We can be friends. Now, let's talk about your horse. What is it?'"

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Jaeger's horse was a Nokota, a feral and endangered American breed, descended from the last surviving wild horses in North Dakota, tracing their bloodlines back to the days of Chief Sitting Bull, who trained Nokotas in the 1800s as war ponies.

McGowan wasn't looking for a war pony. She was looking for a sweet ride. More than that, she was looking for the mystical bond between human and horse that Jaeger had with Leo.

She found it by following in Jaeger's footsteps, attending a four-day "colt starting" clinic led by brothers Frank and Leo Kuntz, who have devoted their lives and their livelihoods to saving the small surviving band of Nokotas in Linton, N.D.

McGowan came back with two Nokotas, Moon and Kachina, and named her farm the Nokota Horse Preserve. Seven Nokotas now roam its rolling 13 acres of pastures and drink from its spring-fed pond. They will be joined in November by 10 more wild Nokotas from North Dakota. McGowan hopes to find owners for the newcomers, as she has for the other preserve horses except Rabbit, a puppylike Nokota that she owns and rides.

Jaeger rode to McGowan's farm on Score, her 6-year-old Nokota gelding, because her first horse, Leo, is "21 now, retired, a couch potato," she said, living a life of equine leisure.

Jaeger was talking about the profound trust that exists between her and Score when she spontaneously demonstrated it by raising herself out of the saddle to stand upright on his back. Score didn't blink an eye, didn't move an inch. "Trust," Jaeger said. McGowan nodded and smiled.

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Looking at McGowan, 51, these days, deeply tanned from working her horses outdoors, dressed in an old Nokota Horse Preserve T-shirt and jeans, blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, it's hard to imagine her former career as a liaison between design and production for major clothing labels in New York's Fashion District.

"It was incredibly stressful," she said. "You really had to hustle. I knew I didn't want to be pushing a garment rack around when I was 40 years old."

She came back home to the Main Line, worked in a natural foods store in Bryn Mawr for a while, lived with her attorney husband, Christopher, and their two young children in Malvern, and realized, "Something was missing for me. I was really struggling inside."

She reflected on her youth as a "barn rat," caring for horses in local riding stables. "I remembered that the last place I wasn't just counting time passing and feeling anxiety was when I was with horses," she said. "I thought, 'You know what? I'm 40 years old. If I don't do it now, I'll never do it.'"

After moving to the Birchrundville farm and failing in her first attempt at finding equine-guided inner peace with Sweetie – "Mentally, she was just not engaged" – McGowan, 51, has found Nokota nirvana with the healing herd.

"They call these Nokota guys wild and mild," she said happily, entering a big pasture of scrub grass. "Sweetie was wild, period."

She walked over to Moon and Kachina, who were hanging out with the third member of their little herd, Ana, under a shade tree. They gathered around her as if she were a returning member of the herd, which,

McGowan said, she is.

When she traveled West seven years ago to meet wild Nokotas for the first time, McGowan and her fellow novice aficionados were told to form a respectful, nonthreatening "human corral" around them so that the horses could approach them individually, smell them, get to know them, and gradually welcome them into the herd.

McGowan said the experience was mystical, and continues to be when Moon, Kachina, and Ana rub against her like overgrown Labrador retrievers, treating her as affectionately as they treat one another.

Ana belongs to Darlyne Bailey, dean emeritus and a professor at Bryn Mawr College's Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, who will bring her students to the Nokota Horse Preserve next week for sessions on different types of leadership within a group – or, in horse sense, a herd.

"This is kind of startling at first to some of my colleagues at Bryn Mawr," Bailey said, laughing. "Some folks are, like, 'Why are you working with horses?' I tell them, Pavlov had his dogs, Skinner had his rats, so Darlyne has her horses. There are different types of leaders within the herd. We talk about discovering our own leadership capacities while we work with the horses."

Bailey said that Ana was at death's door when she first arrived at McGowan's farm because she had been abandoned by her herd in North Dakota, a rare occurrence among Nokotas.

Bailey said that McGowan and her daughter, Neva, 17, "brought Ana back to life." Like McGowan, Bailey used the word *mystical* to describe the Nokota experience, both human and equine.

And like McGowan, Bailey will never forget her trip to North Dakota two years ago to meet Nokotas for the first time.

"I was the only African American in Linton, N.D., and there was a herd of wild horses galloping around me," Bailey said, laughing at the memory. "I confess it was scary, I won't lie," she said. And then it happened. A Nokota named Juniper emerged from the herd and picked Bailey to befriend.

Bailey said she still hopes to rescue Juniper one day. Meanwhile, she loves Ana.

"I feel like I've been invited to be part of a very special community, inclusive in all senses of the word," Bailey said. "Their love is palpable. We are working not just with the animals but with one another, working with an open heart."

Bailey, who has been a distinguished academician for more than 30 years, summed up her heartfelt Nokota experience in a nutshell. "It's all about being happy, honey," she said.

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