

Determined to rescue an All-American horse



By NATALIE SMITH
Staff Writer

For the love of horses, Christine McGowan found a life's passion.

McGowan is founder and president of The Nokota Preserve in Chester Springs, a nonprofit foundation on her 13-acre Flowing Springs Farm that is dedicated to promoting and protecting one of the few wild horse breeds left in the United States.

She said her first encounter with the intelligent and even-tempered Nokota,

described as “wild but mild,” introduced her to a very different kind of horse. In her comfortable farmhouse kitchen, with family and friends going in and out and friendly dogs underfoot, McGowan told her “absolute favorite story.”

She and her family had lived in a Victorian home in Malvern before moving, in 2010, to the “falling-down, train-wreck farm” at the corner of Flowing Springs and South Beaver Hill roads in West Vincent.

“It had been subdivided into a [housing] development,” she said. “The portion that was left became my project. It was an overwhelming task, but I was absolutely determined that I would going to raise my children [daughter Neva, now 17, and son Keegan, 14] on a farm, home-school them and have a different kind of life.”

The family brought its horses with them. A Thoroughbred, which McGowan rode English-style, was the first she owned. “I had a very, very basic traditional horsey background, and I was always struggling with my Thoroughbred,” she said. “You know, we all fall in love with the beautiful image of the horse, and then there’s the actual horsemanship piece. What made one person successful on a horse and what made some person struggle? I wanted to get to the source of that.”

McGowan, a woman with a farm-earned tan and a thick ponytail of long, blonde curls, grew up in Gladwyne. “I never had that really big equestrian lifestyle growing up,” she said. “I rode, but I hung out at a barn and worked for my lessons. I was a ‘barn rat.’ And I had a great time there.”

One September day after moving to the farm, a woman came up McGowan’s driveway astride a beautiful gray horse, her baby in a sling at her side. The day was windy, but the animal remained calm, which McGowan said can be unusual for horses when the weather is breezy.

“Our neighbor rode up on this horse,,” she said. “And the horse was by itself; you know, horses usually like to be in pairs. And she had her infant in front of

her! I found out the horse that she was on was a Nokota."

It was a significant moment. "I said to my husband as I was wrestling my orangutan Thoroughbred, 'The next horse I get is going to be a Nokota.' But I didn't even know what I was talking about," she said.

Nokotas lived on the northern plains of North Dakota, descendants of animals belonging to the Lakota tribe. Sitting Bull, the Lakota chief and medicine man born in 1831, was also a horse breeder, and bred the horses for their "intelligence, endurance, easy-going temperament, compactness and curiosity," according to the website of the Nokota Horse Conservancy, which has trademarked the Nokota name. The small and sturdy horses were prized by the Lakota for their adaptability and compatibility. They were trusted to carry children and the elderly, and were sometimes brought inside the tee-pees as cherished members of the family.

Through the years, the horses ended up becoming feral, and were often regarded as pests by ranchers and others working the land. Some herds were "inside the fence" after the establishment of a national park in the late 1940s. Those herds were ultimately the last of their kind.

Wanting to preserve the breed and its unique pedigree, in the 1980s cowboys and brothers Leo and Frank Kuntz of Linton, N.D., started purchasing the horses from the park service. The Conservancy was later formed, with the aim of promoting and maintaining the bloodlines of the animals, which had been catalogued through DNA testing.

After McGowan made her declaration about wanting a Nokota, her husband, Christopher, contacted Leo Kuntz. "Leo said, 'We're going to be holding a colt start clinic in Ohio this fall. Maybe she would like to come and meet the Nokotas and participate in the clinic,'" McGowan recalled. After some research, she and her family went to Ohio, and had an experience that would change her life.

A colt start, McGowan explained, is the beginning of training for an untouched horse. But because Nokotas are feral as well as untouched, it takes some additional skills. Observing horse trainer Aaron England, who has since come to work at McGowan's farm, McGowan saw him "use a style of natural horsemanship that made everything fall in place with us. In four days, we had these untouched horses -- who were shy and sort of in a corner of the big pasture there -- we had them moving with us, haltered, leading, and we were riding them in four days. This was revolutionary to me."

Her experience cemented her love and fervor for the breed.

"I ended up not getting one Nokota, but two. I wasn't planning on that," she said, laughing. The mares, Moon and Kachina, are among a herd of seven Nokotas at The Preserve. Five others are also there, in active training with their owners, and there are four non-Nokota horses who share the pasture of Flowing Springs Farm.

"Their carriage is strong and athletic," McGowan said of the Nokotas.

"They're very broad in the shoulder. Their heads are traditionally a little larger, not as refined-looking as a Thoroughbred. They are inquisitive, curious; these horses have a sense of humor. They are not like traditional horses. And the fact that they're not domesticated means they're not dulled-down."

But realizing these horses are among the last of their breed drew McGowan to the Nokota Horse Conservancy and its mission to support these truly All-American equines. Her decision to bring Nokotas to her farm and establish a preserve was her effort to keep the horses flourishing.

"With any kind of animal situation, I feel that if you're going to take the wild out of something, you'd better be prepared to take care of it," she said. "I realized very quickly that that went way past my little farm and what I was inspired to create here. I felt like I needed to create something that had some sustainability so that this can continue."

McGowan's enthusiasm was infectious. Good friend Carole Borden, who has a farm a few minutes from McGowan's, has two Nokotas among her five horses. One horse, Pila, is "something of an escape artist," Borden said, laughing.

Borden recalled how Pila got out of the pasture and led the merry band of four horses down the road, much to the surprise of local police, who received concerned phone calls. Pila's destination? McGowan's farm, where his Pennsylvania adventure started and he still had friends. Even though the two women live nearby, there are several streets between them. Borden noted that her clever horse had to make a few navigational decisions before leading the little crew to its ultimate destination.

Borden's girlhood interest in horses had been rekindled after her husband, Michael, seeing photos of her riding as a child, gave Borden the gift of a trail ride. Her meeting of McGowan through mutual Nokota-loving friend Lewis Brandolini eventually had the three of them comprising The Nokota Preserve's Board of Directors.

"I think part of the mission is to bring the visibility to this gem," Borden said. As CEO of her own transportation firm, Borden credits working with Pila, and second Nokota, Mr. Black, in helping her find a bit of tranquility in her very busy world.

"Nokotas are very zen-like," Borden said, comparing them to her more excitable Thoroughbred. "We all talk about being present. We have all sorts of things pulling at us. You always want to say, 'If I only had more time, I could' ... I found that working with the Nokotas, you must slow down. If you have that list running in your head, they're going to feel that, and they're going to react very differently than you want them to react. You want to be in that state of quiet with them.

"Working with them really does cause you to check yourself, and that's what I really came to love and look forward to. I still have to try and find the time

sometimes, but when I do ... it really puts me in a much better place."

In the seven years that McGowan has been working with the Nokotas on her farm, she and others have grown increasingly troubled about the fate of the horses in North Dakota. The Conservancy herd there needs maintaining. They are living mostly on leased land, and getting enough hay is a concern. "The Conservancy did as much as it could do," McGowan said. "[North Dakota] is in this massive drought."

McGowan said they've found a source of hay in Minnesota – enough to fill three trailers. The Preserve is holding a Nov. 4 fundraiser to pay for the hay, its transportation and the pasture.

But many of the Nokota that have come East have fared well. "There are more Nokota horses outside of North Dakota in Chester Springs than anywhere else in the world," McGowan said. "We probably have about 23 Nokota within a five-mile radius, including Carole's farm. And we have placed, I think, 20 Nokota off this farm.

"Each year I host a clinic, a colt start, here, which gives other people a chance to do what I did -- have that incredible 'a-ha' moment," she said. Eleven horses needing placement will be arriving at the farm for this year's foundation clinic, Nov. 2 to 5, with trainers Aaron England and Michael Battenfield. Participants and daily auditors are welcome, she said.

Carole Borden said she's hopeful the public will embrace the undertaking of The Nokota Preserve.

"The bigger purpose for what we're trying to do is bring awareness," she said. "You can take these wonderful horses from completely feral to something that is your best friend. And they are treasures."

Tickets are on sale for The Nokota Preserve Chester Springs "Green for Grass" fundraiser, Saturday, Nov. 4, from 4 to 10 p.m. at Flowing Springs

Farm. There will be a catered dinner and dessert, a silent art auction, and a 45-minute presentation by Frank Kunz about the history of the Nokota breed. Singer/songwriter Liz Longley will be performing. The cost is \$250 per couple. All proceeds go toward hay and pasture for the Nokota horses. More information is available by visiting <https://chesterspringspreserve.org> or calling 610-731-1706.

Natalie Smith may be contacted at DoubleSMedia@rocketmail.com or www.DoubleSMedia.com.