

Valley Center



In the pasture, Jim responds to brushing and attention from Ande Miller. *Photo by Les Anderson*

VC woman establishing equine shelter

By Sarah Jane Leming

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There is **Hope** in the Valley for horses and other equines. At least, there will be once the proper paperwork is finished.

Opening an equine shelter has been an idea in Ande Miller's mind for several years. Finding Jim, an abused Thoroughbred, is what made it happen.

Ande Miller was in Hutchinson for the Kansas State Fair, but while in the city she attended a horse auction in South Hutchinson, where several hundred horses were being sold. There she found Jim. He was, by far, the worst-looking horse at the sale, she said.

"For some reason, my eyes went right to him, and I kept coming back and looking at him," Miller said, describing crawling over the fence to touch

him and pick up his feet.

The horse, more than 30 years old, stood with his head hanging. He hardly moved.

“I decided before the sale even started that I was gonna bring him home,” Miller said. “I couldn’t believe that somebody would let him get in that bad of condition. It didn’t happen over night.”

Miller was bidding against a “killer buyer,” someone who buys animals for slaughter. That’s where Jim would have gone, if not for Miller.

Bidding began at \$35.

“I won the bid eventually,” said Miller, who paid \$120 for Jim. “I didn’t care what it was going to cost, I was going to bring him home.”

Jim, a tall horse at 16 hands, would not have lived through his trip to the slaughterhouse, Miller said firmly. He would have collapsed in the truck, she said.

“The other horses would have stomped all over him,” she said. “He was so weak when I got him home, you couldn’t pick up one of his feet to clean his hooves out because he couldn’t stand on three legs.”

Miller had several large pieces of Jim’s upper teeth on her kitchen table as she told the horse’s story. These pieces, the last of the teeth he had, were cut from Jim’s mouth to allow him to keep food from dropping out as he tried to eat. Miller makes mush for Jim by soaking his feed.

“The people that had him before hadn’t done any care on his teeth,” she said, picking up a big horse tooth and pointing out the sharp growths that hadn’t been filed down.

Horse teeth grow continually, she explained, and sharp pieces cut into the animal’s mouth, making it too painful to eat.

“It doesn’t make any difference how old they are, that’s no reason to not feed them,” Miller said.

Jim’s previous owners, a family near Inman, told Miller the horse’s name was Jim, and that he had been losing weight the past two or three years.

“They just weren’t feeding him,” Miller translated, “I don’t even know how he was alive.”

Jim weighs 800 pounds, but he should be up around 1,100 to 1,200, she said.

“He is putting on a little weight, finally,” Miller reported, saying she’s had to let his horse blanket out twice: proof of a thickening belly.

“He’s definitely feeling better,” she said. “I knew when I brought him home he may drop dead tomorrow, but at least he was here and somebody loved him for a little while. He didn’t deserve to be thrown in a truck and stomped to death.”

Miller, a nurse at Wesley, lives on the 80 acres of land she bought in 1980 with her two adopted daughters and her husband of six years. Miller grew up in Valley Center, in a house that was always full of animals, and as a child she sneaked into her neighbor's field to ride the horses.

"When I was 13, my grandmother and grandfather bought me my first horse," said Miller.

Miller and neighbor Lisa Kupfersmith, along with farrier Lisa Allen, are directors of **Hope** in the Valley. The women met in Miller's home and discussed the bylaws and mission statement, which are nearly finalized. The three horse lovers also talked about how they came to love the equines.

"I got my first horse when I was about 12," said Allen, who was raised in Maine and now lives in Maize with her daughter. "Every opportunity I had to get on a horse, I was on one. I've been a horse nut right from the beginning."

Allen was so crazy about horses she didn't get driver's license until she was 20 because she was too busy riding.

"Not me," said Kupfersmith, who has lived in the Valley Center area for 24 years. "I was raised in the city, and didn't have anything to do with horses until I met my husband."

She has a son and daughter who love to ride.

"A horse to me is a pet," Kupfersmith said. "I see the value in them the same as I would my dog. They need to be enjoyed."

The shelter, named **Hope** in the Valley to be associated with Valley Center, will be a place for equines to be nursed back to health and trained, then adopted to loving homes. There also will be a sanctuary for the animals too abused or old to be adopted. That's where Jim will be until he dies.

"I've been researching this for months and months," Miller said, gesturing to the row of organized binders on the other side of Jim's teeth.

The binders are full of information she has gathered to help with her mission. She, Kupfersmith and Allen went over plans for volunteers, adoptions, horse foster homes, fundraising and sponsors.

"The plan is to put the rescue up front here," Miller said, gesturing to the land beyond the kitchen window of her spacious home.

She'll need some new facilities, but for now she has room for more, despite the nearly 10 other horses on Miller's property.

Jim is kept separate from the other horses because he is still so weak, but his attitude is healthy.

"He's a happy horse," said Allen.

He was emaciated, but, "even when he first came...he wasn't an unhappy soul," said Kupfersmith.

“He hasn’t given up,” said Miller. “He’s definitely a fighter.”

Not all horses that might come to **Hope** in the Valley will be nursed back to health.

“We can humanely euthanize them,” Miller said of the horses that are in too much pain.

This, she said, would be a tough but necessary decision at times.

But Jim was not a horse they would have euthanized, though he was incredibly old and deathly thin.

Why? Because he showed so much **hope** for life.