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STAFF/REBECCA J. DUCKER Denise Hughes, co-owner of Luck Farms in Coward, spends a few minutes with Flash, left, and Wheezy, two of the horses the farm is caring for as part of Willie Nelson's Habitat for Horses program.

Horse haven

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By Shawn Singleton

They're crammed into the trailer of a truck designed to hold pigs, cows and chickens. Without food or water, they're driven across the Canadian and Mexican borders to slaughterhouses.

Once there, some are stabbed repeatedly in the neck with a knife called a puntilla until the spinal cord is severed, causing them to painfully suffocate to death. Worse yet, some are slaughtered by use of a device called the captive bolt, a four-inch retractable nail. They're hit repeatedly in the forehead with the captive bolt, which is supposed to render them unconscious, but often doesn't. A hind leg is then shackled and they're lifted into the air upside down to have their throat cut and be bled out, often while they're still conscious. The animals that often meet these horrific fates aren't pigs, cows or chickens. They're horses. Beautiful beasts slaughtered by the tens of thousands and used to make cosmetics, gelatin and even food. The more fortunate, though, can be found on a farm in Coward that has dedicated its existence to saving horses headed for store shelves.

A name befitting a cause Luck Farms is more than just a name to co-owner Denise Hughes. It is a movement. And for many a horse whose luck almost ran out, it is a second chance. Luck Farms is the first farm in South Carolina to be designated a Habitat for Horses haven. Fifteen horses from North America and the Caribbean have been brought to the farm. One already has been adopted and four more have adoptions pending approval.

“These are magnificent animals. Every one of them is beautiful in its own way,” Hughes said. “People are only concerned with what they’re doing that minute, and not what’s going on everywhere else. Something led me to do this.”

Hughes became interested in saving horses through her friend, country music legend Willie Nelson. “I’ve known Willie for about 14 years,” she said. “He decided that, because of the slaughterhouses, he would adopt 20 horses. Those horses became the first of what is now the Willie Nelson signature series.”

Rowdy finds a home. Calvin and Linda Turner traversed Luck Farms’ 250 acres looking for a horse to join the three they already have. When the Hemingway couple saw a majestic and gentle white horse named Rowdy Rawhide, they immediately wanted to add it to the family. “As soon as I saw him come off the truck, I wanted him,” Linda Turner said. “I’ve been riding him every day until the paperwork came through.” Rowdy is the first horse to be adopted through the state’s Habitat for Horses program. Before being allowed to take a horse home, prospective owners go through an extensive background check. As the Turners loaded Rowdy into their trailer, Hughes fought back tears of happiness, as well as sadness. “Rowdy’s lucky to have found a home so fast,” Hughes said. “We have really rushed this adoption through because we want to give Rowdy and horses like him a forever home.” “He’s calm,” Calvin Turner said of the horse. “My wife can handle him, and he needed a home.”

A near victim of corporate America C.J. is a fun-loving, 22-month old horse that — like a human baby — will chew on just about anything that isn’t nailed down. It’s hard to believe that, as a four-month old foal, she was headed for the slaughterhouse. C.J.’s mother was a filly whose urine during pregnancy was used to make Premarin, a hormone-replacement therapy drug prescribed to women going through menopause. Once a mare gives birth and no longer has pregnant urine for use in the drug, the foal is considered useless. Most are fattened up and sent straight to slaughterhouses. Within six months of giving birth, mares are returned to the production line. If a mare doesn’t become pregnant within a short period after that, they will share the same fate as their offspring.

Rescued from paradise. Fabulous Flash and Duchess are a pair of thoroughbreds from the Virgin Islands. As beautiful as the island paradise is, the conditions the former racehorses were found in were far from lavish. Before being brought to Luck Farms, the horses were starving in a stall loaded with feces and debris. Hughes said the pair were victims of the money machine known as horse racing. Minor injuries can end a thoroughbred’s career and, subsequently, its life. Winning a championship, by the way, doesn’t always stave off a trip to the slaughterhouse. Ferdinand, the 1986 Kentucky Derby winner, met its end in a slaughterhouse. Hall of Famer Exceller also met the same fate in a business where profits preclude the lives of its most prized possessions. “After their racing careers, if (the horses) pull a hamstring or get sick, they go straight to slaughter,” Hughes said. “They can’t make money for the owners anymore.”

Many still in need. Even though Luck Farms and Habitat for Horses have saved many horses from abuse and eventual slaughter, more work needs to be done. There are horses in the Palmetto that are suffering from abuse and neglect. Others, in the minds of their owners, have outlived their usefulness. “You’d be surprised how many horses right here in South Carolina are starving because the people who own them don’t care,” Calvin Turner said. “If I’d ever get to the point that I couldn’t feed Rowdy, I’d find someone who could.”

Luck Farms receives private contributions as well as corporate sponsorships from businesses such as Florence Feed and Seed. All donations go solely to the care of the horses. “If all of us pull together, we can save a lot of horses,” Hughes said. “We can save what we can save, and cry for those we can’t. “I believe we are making a difference.”

It is thought that all the rescued horses eventually will be adopted. One horse, however, will never leave. Wheezy is an aged quarter horse that suffered from abuse and neglect. He recently had a tracheotomy, which requires daily cleaning to prevent infection. Wheezy’s fate will not be a slaughterhouse, though. He will spend the remainder of his life under the care of Hughes and her staff.

“Most of these horses and mules will have forever homes,” Hughes said. “And the ones that can’t find a forever home already have one — right here.”