

Nonprofit pairs troubled teens, rescued foals

By Wendy Bowman-Littler
STAFF WRITER

Lissa Corcoran is the proud new mother of eight.

"I've turned into that obnoxious woman who can only gush about her children," said Corcoran, who recently became the owner of eight 5-month-old rescued foals that will be paired with troubled teens as part of a new nonprofit equine therapy program called **HopeFoil of Georgia**.

The foals, which likely would have been auctioned off and slaughtered soon after they were born, have instead traveled hundreds of miles to Powder Springs from a rescue-adoption agency in Manitoba, Canada. They were born to mares whose estrogen-rich urine is used to produce hormone-replacement drugs.



JOANN VITELLI

Galloping on: Lissa Corcoran plans to adopt more foals each fall and spring to continue the HopeFoil program and reach out to more teens.

Once the foals are fully rested from the stress of their trip, teens from local agencies such as **The Bridge**, Hillside and **Laurel Heights Hospital** will take care of and raise them for five-month

periods as part of their therapy regimen. The teens will watch a video about the relationship between the foals and their moms. Then, they will meet the foals and see how they relate with one another and what they need to survive in their new surroundings. Organizers hope the program will create an environment that encourages the teens to talk about their own experiences.

The youth, most of whom have been abused and have other conditions such as attention deficit disorder, also will complete training activities with the foals — from teaching them how to pick up their hooves to putting halters on them. The activities are geared toward helping the teens develop skills such as anger management, trust and problem-solving.

"We have a way of including these foals in a form of therapy which is mutually beneficial to both the child and the foal," said Corcoran, adding that her own experience at **The Bridge** as a child in the mid-1980s and her lifelong love of horses led her to want to combine horses and therapy in this unique way.

"I have been involved with horses almost my entire life, and the anchor that helped me hold things together was my involvement with horses," she said. "When I was 8 and 9, I wanted to be a therapist. I went through foster care and **The Bridge** because of a difficult family life, and I believe my own experiences were intended to make me a therapist."

"These foals share a story that our kids can relate to, and that therapeutic relationship gives our kids life skills, in addition to saving the foals," she said. "By rescuing the foals, we meet two community needs."

The foals cost \$400 each, and are purchased through the PMU (Pregnant Mare Urine) Foal Adoption Network Inc., an Illinois-based volunteer, nonprofit foal placement group that tries to reduce the number of PMU foals that end up at auction by adopting them into homes.

Four of the foals were adopted by "friends," who have volunteered to let Corcoran use them for the HopeFoil program; they will be kept at a farm in Powder Springs. The other four foals were adopted by Corcoran's **Flying Change** equine therapy program, which she operates with the help of licensed therapists and other volunteers at a barn in Vinings.

HopeFoil will fall under the umbrella of **Flying Change**, which she started in 1996 while in college at **The University of Georgia**, uses horses to help families that have children with emotional and

behavioral problems. **Flying Change**, which went from for-profit to nonprofit this past year, typically works with up to 40 kids between the ages of 13 and 19 each week.

The organization previously supported the expense of the horses through revenue-producing programs, such as riding lessons, but Corcoran now hopes to sustain both groups through corporate sponsorships. Corcoran said she also wants to apply for foundation and government grants, and will offer corporations the chance to sponsor the HopeFoil foals for \$500 to \$8,000 per year.

"There is a reason that horse ownership is considered a luxury; they're expensive," she said. The cost to feed, shelter and take care of the eight new foals will start at around \$60,000 per year for boarding, plus vet and farrier care and health insurance.

Sponsorship will range from the \$500 bronze level, which includes a certificate of recognition and photo of the 2004 HopeFoil, to the \$8,000 platinum level, featuring the opportunity to name a foal after the company, and one "playtime" per month for company employees and their families with the foal.

"It sounds like it could end up being a high-profile type of sponsorship that is going to enhance a company's image," said Deborah Lester, a professor of marketing at **Kennesaw State University's** Michael J. Coles College of Business.

"It's a win-win situation for everybody involved," Lester said. "The foals are going to gain life and human interaction, and these young people are going to have something they can actually take care of and who have basically been through the same type of trauma that these young people have."

Corcoran just kicked off the sponsorship program. But she said the community response to the program has been incredible with gifts coming from companies such as **Art with a Conscience**, **The Stock Market**, **AAA Realty**, and the **Phoenix & Dragon Bookstore**.

"Even without any promotion, the phone has rung like crazy with calls from people wanting to visit the foals with their families and help out," said Corcoran, adding that a local artist has volunteered to paint a portrait of the foals, the first two months of the foals' feed was donated, a farrier volunteered his services and writers offered to create a brochure.

"Lissa's program, to me, is just so very special in the fact that it gives the opportunity to not only rescue these little foals from being slaughtered, but it's such an opportunity to help these children who have been abused and neglected to feel the love," said Donna Dillard-Grimsley, a land and commercial real estate broker with Atlanta-based **Brokers Realty** and one of many people who has volunteered to help.

"Instead of the children thinking there's nothing out there in the world but pain and hurt, they get a chance to have some healing," she said.

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