

## THE EQUINE SANCTUARY



O J A I , C A L I F O R N I A

A short drive north of Los Angeles and within an hour southeast of Santa Barbara lies the mystical Ojai Valley. Citrus groves and palm and eucalyptus trees line curving country roads, and the hills glow pinkish orange at dusk. In 2000, lifelong equine advocate and rehabilitation specialist Alexis Ells was hunting for horse property when she spotted a

dilapidated ranch with a deteriorating barn and pastures on the outskirts of Ojai. In spite of its poor condition, Alexis said she knew it was the ideal place to create the sanctuary that she'd dreamed about since childhood. Nestled between fragrant orange groves with an intoxicating view of the Topa Topa Mountains, the property needed a lot of work when Alexis set her sights on it. Her friends said she was crazy. But Alexis had a vision: she could see in her mind's eye the layout of the paddocks, arena, barn, and gardens; it was the perfect place to practice her healing arts and provide sanctuary for wounded horses and people.

Now, more than 100 white rose bushes line the drive along the outer paddocks. There are pepper trees, southwestern clay pots overflowing with native flowers, garden statues, and wind chimes that produce calming sound effects. On the west side of the property, a pool that the sanctuary maintains for the benefit of its volunteers and their dogs glitters in the sun. The modern two-story ranch-style home, which also serves as the office, conference center, volunteer station, and tack room, has large front windows and an expansive deck overlooking the arena and paddocks.

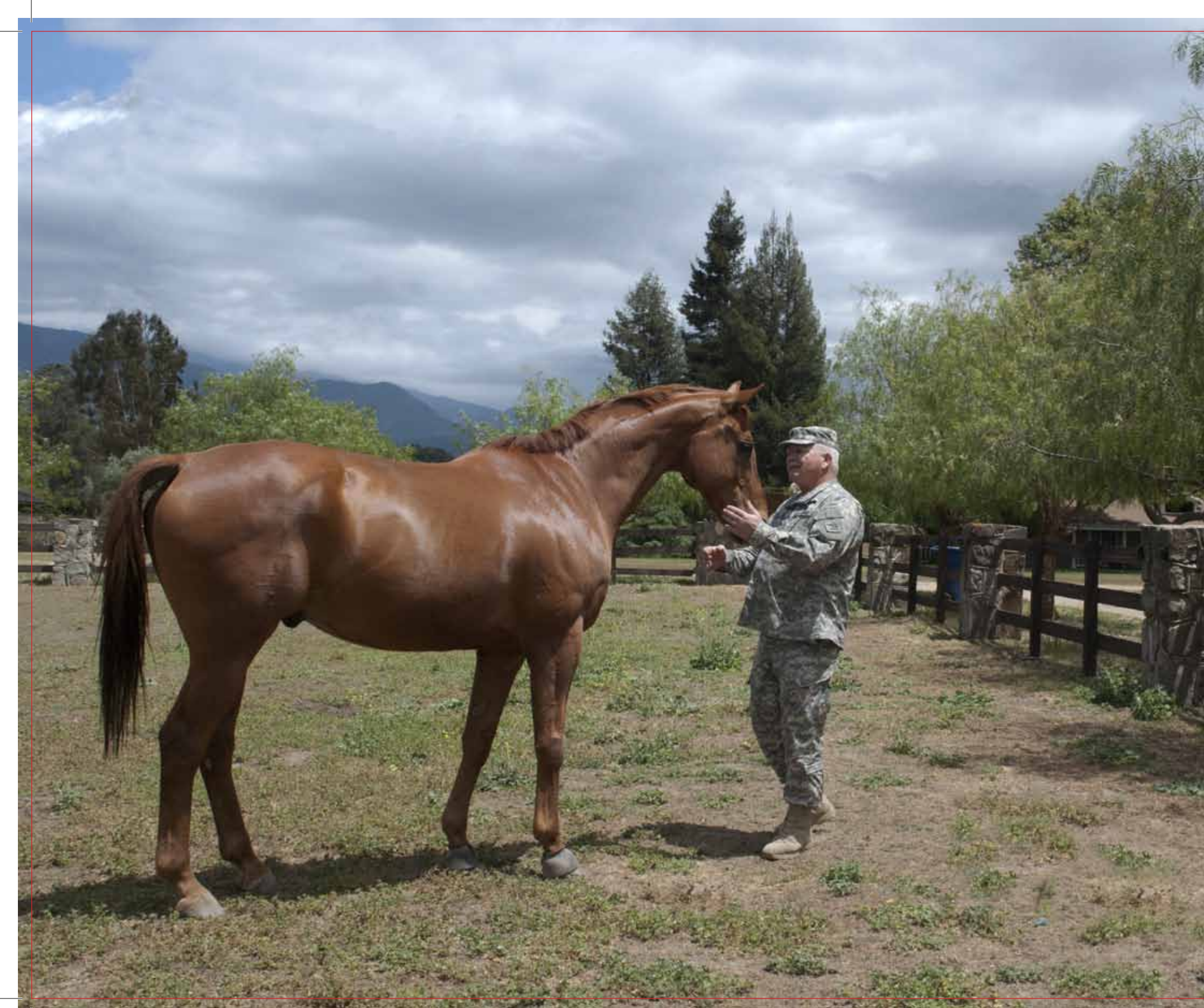
From this vantage point, Alexis keeps a trained eye on her Good Will Ambassadors, a group of horses that were rescued from a life of competitive sport and retrained to help human beings recover from illness, injury, and stress. Although they are highly trained and skilled athletes with impressive pedigrees and accomplishments, these horses would have met premature



Above: A volunteer grazes Elegante as Angel gazes across the roses. Opposite: Angel, 12, is nearly healed after suffering an attack by a wildcat.







and unnecessary deaths had The Equine Sanctuary not intervened. In addition, 22 other rescued Thoroughbreds that live in foster care at a nearby training barn would have met a similar fate, as well as the rescues The Equine Sanctuary saves from kill pens throughout the country. The horses that call the sanctuary home are permanent residents; their only job is to be emissaries of good will. It's a dignified role and one well deserved by these exquisite creatures that were pushed to the brink of their demise.

#### A PLACE FOR HEALING

The Equine Sanctuary is a place for the healing of both horses and human beings. There are therapy riding classes for children and adults with disabilities, youth-leadership and mentoring, and student community-service programs. Recent studies show that horses make exceptional therapy animals because of their ability to mirror human feelings and provide nonverbal feedback. Like human beings, they are social animals with a wide range of emotions, yet they establish clear boundaries and have no hidden agendas. They are also very intuitive. Because of these traits, an effective therapy riding class or groundwork can teach students self-awareness, honest communication, and trust.

Perhaps because of their traumatic pasts, The Equine Sanctuary's Good Will Ambassadors have proven to be exceptional therapy horses. Their transitions from highly competitive and stressed-out lives as performance and sport horses to tranquil, happy lives at the sanctuary are inspirational to the children and adults that visit or attend the many classes available.

One of the most ambitious programs, Horse Soldiers, has been especially helpful for war veterans returning from deployment with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injuries (TBI). Time

spent with the therapy horses helped many veterans regain relationship skills such as communication and trust, which contribute to their ability to successfully rebuild their lives. Just having an opportunity to sit in quiet with another being that has also experienced trauma forges a symbiotic bond and calms jangled nerves. Some veterans have noted that time spent with the horses helped diminish the persistent noises in their heads and manage tempers that flare with little provocation. Many have observed that time with the therapy horses helped them reach a deeper state of sleep, a natural function that can be maddeningly elusive to people suffering from PTSD and TBI.

Michael Kelly, a staff sergeant with the National Guard, returned to California with post-concussive injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder after serving in Iraq. He has been participating in Horse Soldiers since it launched and has been an enthusiastic advocate for the program. Although he spent most of his life around horses, he said that working with rescued horses had a profound effect on his well-being and helped him cope with the most vexing symptoms of PTSD.

The youth programs at The Equine Sanctuary have also been well received by the community. Children with disabilities, youth groups, local school groups, and children from inner-city areas arrive each week to meet the horses and hear about their inspiring stories. Alexis impresses on her visitors that overcoming obstacles is a choice they can make rather than accepting undesirable circumstances. "I explain that you either become a victim of your circumstances or you choose to make a better life for yourself and participate in the solution," she said. "Every horse came here following a tragedy; they were scared, alone, and in pain, but they a got second chance at life. Now these magnificent animals help traumatized people learn to trust again."

Michael Kelly, whose military service in Iraq resulted in post-traumatic stress disorder, has formed a special bond with Hansel and is a strong advocate for the sanctuary's Horse Soldiers program.





## GROUNDWORK

Hansel came to a complete stop, tossed his head, and waited for Alexis to give him the next cue as the dust settled around his large hooves. It was late in the afternoon but unusually warm for a spring day in the Ojai Valley. We admired Hansel as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his muscles rippling through his glossy chestnut coat. Alexis gave him a quiet verbal command and with a slight toss of his gingerbread-colored mane, he was off again, effortlessly transitioning into a canter around her.

Above: Visitors greet Stylin', who provides therapy for children with disabilities. Opposite: Alexis Ells, the sanctuary's founder and director, demonstrates Hansel's ability to back perfectly between parallel rods.

At 17.2 hands, Hansel is one of the largest horses at The Equine Sanctuary. He's also beautiful and devilishly charming. His relaxed responses to Alexis's cues suggest he has never had a troubled day in his life, but nothing could be further from the truth. Before Hansel arrived at the sanctuary he'd been declared a "dangerous rogue" and was slated for slaughter; his reputation overshadowed his good looks and pedigree.

Although he boasts impressive bloodlines—he's the son of a Preakness and Belmont Stakes winner—Hansel's willful temperament and desire to run tested his former owner and anyone else who climbed on his back or attempted to work with him. He had become notorious for breaking away from anyone who tried to lead him—until he met Alexis. Although he was a handful when he arrived, Alexis listened to Hansel and watched how he reacted to different objects, horses, and people. She calmly guided him through his groundwork and riding exercises; she was consistent, patient, and attentive. He responded to her methodology, and after two years of hard work Hansel the incorrigible "bad boy" became an outstanding Good Will Ambassador and a favorite with the volunteers and military veterans.

Alexis spent countless hours on Hansel's training and rehabilitation, and she and the volunteers give the same amount of attention to every horse at the sanctuary. Some require less retraining but have extensive injuries, whereas others arrive at the sanctuary with both psychological and physical damage. Stylin' was an Olympic-level three-day event horse until he had a nervous breakdown, attacked his rider, and was considered too dangerous to continue in competition. After months of diagnostics and pasture rest his owner decided euthanasia was the only solution to his "unexplainable" condition. A veterinarian colleague suggested that Stylin' be sent to The Equine Sanctuary for rehabilitation with Alexis, and now he's a therapy horse for children with disabilities. He loves his job and his special students







Sir Thomas, 50, a Thoroughbred polo pony living at the sanctuary for 14 years, enjoys a remarkable old age.

adore him. Alexis told a story of his first student, a boy with autism that never uttered a word. Then, one day after his lesson, the boy affectionately patted his mount and with much enthusiasm said, “Stylin.” It was the boy’s first word and launched his effort to speak. His parents later told Alexis that he interjected the horse’s name into every sentence for months.

Elegante, a strawberry blonde supermodel of the horse world, was an international champion polo pony until she fell during a match, causing irreparable damage to her front leg that required six permanent pins for stabilization. Sir Thomas, the sanctuary’s elder statesman at age 50, was a professional polo pony imported from Argentina in his youth. When Alexis found him, he was languishing in a field, underweight and in poor health with a thinning tail and knotted mane. Now, the elder gelding is the epitome of good health; his coat maintains a lovely sheen and the sparkle in his eye belies his years.

Most of the horses Alexis rescues require some form of ongoing medical care throughout their lives, a constant strain on the sanctuary’s resources. That’s where Alexis’s gift as a healer combined with years of practice using both allopathic and alternative therapies proves to be an essential resource. She does all the day-to-day administration of health care, such as stitching and dressing wounds, administering intravenous fluids, wrapping legs, and checking vital signs, as well as using her skills in preventative care. Her knowledge of biomechanics, structural integration, acupuncture, and trigger-point and laser therapies serve her well and she implements them on her mid-morning rounds. All the horses receive organic whole food supplements and homeopathic medicines from The Equine Sanctuary’s sponsoring company, Terra Oceana. When a horse is very ill or injured, Alexis plays special chants and classical music on a compact disc player to aid the healing process.

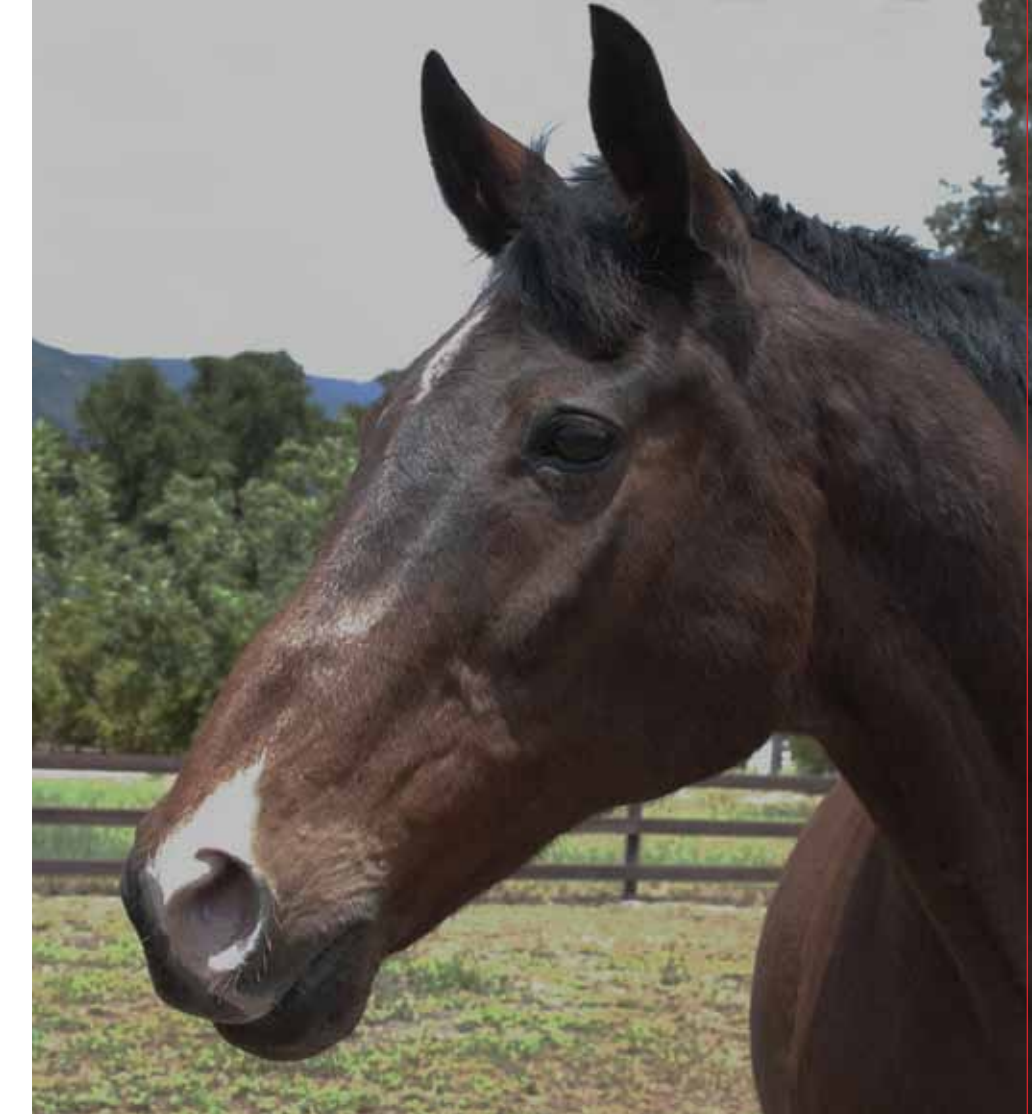
Alexis makes every effort to address the unique needs of each horse so that he or she is able to reach optimal health and complete emotional well-being. Several times a day, the horses are moved from one paddock to another, released out to pasture to graze, or allowed to remain in their covered shade corrals in extreme weather conditions. Rocks, branches, and droppings are removed from paddocks in the morning, and buckets are scrubbed clean every day. Although the tireless ranch hand, Eddie, and the volunteers handle most of these chores, Alexis is never far away, watching the horses for changes in their behavior or health, keeping her eye out for small, newly unearthed rocks that could break a coffin bone.

#### MANY ARE CALLED; FEW ARE CHOSEN

On Saturdays, volunteer Rhonda Tyacke drives nearly an hour from her home following a long week at her job. She has been volunteering at The Equine Sanctuary for eight years and her consistency has rewarded her with strong bonds to all the horses. From the moment she arrives until she leaves, Rhonda quietly moves from one chore to the next. She prefers to work alone, finding companionship in the horses as she mucks stalls, rakes paddocks, and grooms. The work gives her mind a rest, but it also gives her the satisfaction of knowing that she is contributing to the well-being of the horses.

Like most nonprofit organizations, The Equine Sanctuary relies on volunteers to help keep the ranch going. Although their numbers fluctuate, Alexis can count on a core group of volunteers to be at the ranch every day from dawn until after dusk, all of them content to perform the mundane but important (and meditative) chores of stable maintenance and horse care.

“I was brought up to give back what you can when you can,” said another volunteer, Sandy Horning. She and her dog, Nemo, drive to Ojai



Prince Charles, 39, a Thoroughbred, is missing his lower teeth as the result of severe abuse.



from Malibu every week, arriving early in the morning and working without a break until the early afternoon. An experienced rider with a horse of her own, Sandy prefers the physical labor. She said it has been therapeutic. She's also deeply committed to helping animals. "I think of my time here with Alexis and the horses as a way to give and to receive," she said.

Before 2008, The Equine Sanctuary successfully placed many rescued Thoroughbreds in adoptive homes through a rigorous background check and matchmaking process. But the economic downturn of that year and the rising costs of hay and grain have made it more difficult to place horses in adoptive homes. "It is heartbreaking because we cannot help all the horses in need. It's just a matter of getting the message out. With a supporter like Thoroughbred Charities of America committed to the betterment of the equine world, I believe there is tremendous hope," said Alexis.

In spite of the challenges, Alexis focuses on doing the best she can for the horses in her care and sharing their unique stories of survival and transformation with others. She campaigns against horse slaughter and against overbreeding, which she blames in part for the widespread need for rescue facilities such as The Equine Sanctuary, and impresses on students and visitors the importance of commitment to and consistency of care for all animals.

"We would love to have this be a legacy that goes on," said Alexis, as she looked out over a paddock where a big bay gelding named L. B. stood in repose. Regardless of what changes occur, Alexis plans on being present and involved with the horses. "I would like to help shift the paradigm of human-animal relations and awareness; to make a greater impact on people to show how it is a reflection of consciousness that we bring solutions and compassion to help horses and all those in need."

Maka Nani, a rescued Rhodesian Ridgeback, relaxes in the shade with her companions Sir Thomas and Elegante.







Angel lopes freely around her paddock.





Above: Hansel, once described as "a dangerous rogue," gazes with a kind eye.  
Opposite: A dramatic mountain landscape frames the beautifully maintained Equine Sanctuary.

