

Lafayette Parish teen Andrea Owens rescues some thoroughbreds, retrains them for nonracing sports.

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Advocate staff photo by BRAD BOWIE -- Aspiring trainer Andrea Owens works with one of the horses in her barn at the Evangeline Training Center on July 24. Owens wants to give retired thoroughbreds a second life as trailriders or jumping horses.

The thoroughbred racing career only lasts so long. For some it's not a bad life of retirement. But others end up in slaughterhouses. That's where Lafayette Parish teen Andrea Owens enters as she rescues these horses and retrains them for nonracing sports.

By Anne Lang

Special to The Advocate

Thoroughbred horses are lovely to watch as they majestically thunder past the grandstands at America's racetracks. But those horses' fates when their racing days are over are not always so lovely.

One Youngsville teenager is doing her part to reduce that trend, starting in her home state.

For more than five years, Andrea Owens, 16, has been on a mission to prepare off-the-track thoroughbreds for alternative careers with new owners. So far, she has retrained and relocated nearly 75 horses that are no longer racing, whether because of advancing age, low earnings or other circumstances.

"I try to get as many horses as I can," she said.

Owens' age, her individualized retraining program and her impressive placement record set her apart from the coterie of owners and trainers who actively attempt to find new homes for their former racehorses. Typically, those horses are sold to nonracing equestrians, converted to breeding stock or retired to shady pastures.

But less fortunate ex-runners can end up at livestock auctions where a certain type of buyer pays a few hundred dollars per animal, then resells them to slaughterhouses in Canada or Mexico. Often, those auction horses are still sound of mind and body, but have simply fallen victim to the imbalance of supply and demand on racetracks.

"I'm an animal lover," Owens said, "and I don't agree with taking horses of any breed to slaughter. It isn't humane, and it's sad to know there are people out there who think it's OK to do this to them."

Owens is secure in her convictions, because she's no stranger to the racing world. Her stepfather is trainer Martin Meza, and her mother, Darlene, manages the family's equine affairs. Several young racing prospects are among the dozen or so thoroughbreds residing at the family's 11-acre farm, located 30 miles south of Evangeline Downs (one of four Louisiana ovals where Meza's horses race).

A mere 5 years old when she began riding, Owens quickly displayed an innate talent — earning multiple championships on a succession of ponies at top-rated hunter/jumper shows. She was just 11 when she took on her first off-the-track

thoroughbred as a retraining project.

“She was a beautiful horse, and she turned out to be a beautiful jumper,” Owens said. “I wanted to keep her, but I sold her to someone who really wanted her.”

At that point, Owens realized she could provide a valuable service by taking other former racehorses off the track, training them at home to make them suitable for nonracing sports, then plowing any sales revenue back into her enterprise to help pay for necessities such as feed and veterinary care.

Meza’s connections at Louisiana tracks have helped spread the word of Owens’ endeavors, as does Owens herself when she confidently walks through the barn area to inquire about candidates for her project. Trainers have gratefully responded by sending her horses whose track careers have ended, yet are suitable prospects for new jobs.

Owens doesn’t pay for the horses she acquires, except when she hears of a thoroughbred that’s been sold at an auction from which horses are typically transported to foreign slaughterhouses. Numerous times, Owens and her mother have responded to a tipoff by rushing to the auction yard (with trailer in tow) and paying up to \$500 to rescue the horse before it’s hauled away.

“Racing is such a hard industry for horses, and so many of them end up in bad hands if they can’t find a new home,” said Louisiana trainer Laura Ryan, who has sent about 10 horses to Owens.

“But Andrea takes the time — whether it’s two, four or six months — to get an animal off the track and position it to where it can have a productive career after racing. She’s hardworking, enthusiastic and dedicated.”

Owens is also extremely busy, juggling her studies (she’s a junior at St. Thomas More in Lafayette), along with retraining thoroughbreds, exercising racehorses at the track, competing in out-of-town horse shows, and occasionally foxhunting in Mississippi.

As such, she tries to focus on just two or three former racehorses at a time, starting by turning them out to pasture (often for several months) to help them relax from the hustle-bustle of the track. Then she slowly begins working with them on the ground until she feels they’re ready to ride.

At first, Owens said, former racehorses are hypersensitive to sudden movements by a rider, or even something as innocuous as a swirl of leaves.

“Just trying to get them to calm down is a challenge,” she said. Once they’ve

advanced to the riding phase, “I try to get them to control their speed and balance their bodies.”

Teaching the horses to jump is held off until they’re mentally ready, Owens said. Sometimes she’ll take them foxhunting as an introduction to jumping.

“Horses like to do things in packs,” she said, “so when they see the others jumping, they usually want to do it too.” If not, a dressage career is often an alternative, she said.

Owens has a distinct insider’s edge in working with thoroughbreds, as she started galloping Meza’s runners at Evangeline Training Center in Carencro when she was 14. Earlier this summer, the stewards and outriders at Evangeline Downs granted Owens a license for exercising horses on the actual racetrack in Opelousas, where she can be found several mornings a week.

But the hunter/jumper realm remains Owens’ first passion, and she hopes to someday become a professional rider/trainer.

The only former racehorse that Owens has kept for herself is 9-year-old Heath’s Gold. She’s spent the past two years turning the gelding into a show hunter who’s started winning at the 3-foot-6 level, but Owens is steering him toward an eventual career as a Grand Prix jumper.

“I’m trying to get his mind together first,” Owens said, “because he gets frazzled easily. He flipped over the first time I got on him, but we were both OK.”

Similarly risky incidents rarely happen during any of her multiple equestrian activities, Owens said, and she has a theory about that.

“I really don’t get nervous when I ride, and I try not to overreact to unexpected things that the horses might do,” she said with a shrug. “I just stay relaxed and take things as they come. When you overreact, you just make the problem bigger.”

In fact, she continued, the biggest frustration with her thoroughbred retraining project is “trying to convince people that just because these are former racehorses, they’re not going to take off running,” she said. “If you’re calm and relaxed, your horse will be, too. No matter what breed it is.”

However, it helps that “Thoroughbreds remember what they’ve been taught,” she said. “You don’t have to teach them the same thing over again the next time you ride them. Also, they have great personalities, and a very smooth, athletic way of moving.”

Owens makes it a point to follow the careers of horses she has sold, and said she has

yet to receive a negative report.

“It is very humbling to be able to help these horses move on,” she said. “It makes me enjoy working with them, because it’s for a good cause, and I know they will continue to be in good hands.”

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