

David Dyson petting two of the horses that he cares for at Compassion Ranch in Jemison, Ala., on July 14.

PHOTO BY JANNIS FALKENSTERN FOR EQUUS TIMES



EDUCATION

Saving Animals and Improving People

Compassion Ranch doubles as an animal sanctuary and a place for youth to build character

By Jannis Falkenstern

JEMISON, ALA.—IN THE deep woods of Central Alabama lives a real-life Dr. Dolittle. To his family, friends, and acquaintances, he's David Dyson, and he's on a mission to save animals and inspire youth through character education.

The driveway leading to the entrance of Compassion Ranch is lined with stately oaks. Taking notice of visitors, horses gallop to the fence line for a closer look. And despite a background of abuse and neglect, they are happy to see people.

Compassion Ranch is home to 34 animals. And while some were brought there as a result of abuse or abandonment, others were donated after the passing of their owners, or when their owners were no longer able to take care of them.

When Dyson isn't feeding and caring for these animals, he's figuring out ways to fund the ranch under its nonprofit status, which includes writing grants to support the sanctuary for the horses, goats, dogs, cats, and donkeys he houses on his property in Chilton County.

"The goal is for most, if not all, of the animals of Compassion Ranch to live here for the rest of their lives."

David Dyson,
owner, Compassion Ranch

He's quick to point out that his ranch is a sanctuary and not a shelter—there's a difference.

"Most animal welfare service groups are rescues or shelters, who find forever homes for animals rescued or surrendered," Dyson told *Insight* during a recent tour of the ranch. "We support them. We have done that work."

"Our model focuses on serving as a sanctuary and education center to give animals second chances and to involve them in programs of service to people."

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the animals of Compassion Ranch to live here for the rest of their lives."

In 1995, Alabama legislators selected 25 character traits they believed made a good citizen and required all schools to teach those traits in an effort to reduce school violence. The Alabama State Board of Education was charged with developing and implementing character education programs for all grades, with no less than 10 minutes of instruction per day. Some of the character traits included compassion, courage, patriotism, citizenship, loyalty, and perseverance. And students were to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag as part of the daily instruction.

COMPASSION RANCH IS A SANCTUARY and education center that not only gives second chances to abused and neglected animals, but also provides a "service to people through character traits education," he said.

"Our model of service combines the care of animals and working on root causes of animal abuse and abandonment—character, beliefs, habits," Dyson said as he was trimming the hooves of a Shetland pony. "We develop and provide educational resources useful in schools and homes, plus we provide

Of the 34 animals at the ranch, some came there as a result of abuse or abandonment, while others were donated after the passing of their owners or when their owners could no longer take care of them.

either experience at the ranch or at the location of the group served.

"We care for animals who need our help, and they serve purposes of inspiring people and working around the farm."

Dyson explained that he coaches using the character traits of compassion, courage, cooperation, and patriotism. He holds day camps, seminars, and personal leadership coaching for anyone in need of it.

He believes that by interacting with the animals and learning of their hardships before they were brought to him, people will learn to be more compassionate not only with animals, but also to their fellow man.

It's his belief that animal abuse and neglect are learned behaviors.

"Abusers often learn their behavior growing up. If Dad thought it was OK to not protect the family dog with fencing and shelter, or to shoot another dog because he came into the yard, or to 'dump' a dog because he became inconvenient, the children may repeat [that behavior]," Dyson said.

"TETHERING DOGS ON chains usually is a learned behavior. So is harming or killing animals for entertainment. To change, we have to show and try to inspire improved beliefs and actions.

"Character starts at home and school. We can do more supporting teachers to help students learn and experience character traits that lead them to grow up more caring, ethical, and responsible. We provide experiences for parents and children, grandparents, grandchildren, and others who learn about and care for animals.

"People tend to treat other people about the same as they treat animals, especially when no one is looking."

Aside from compassion and care, which are there in abundance, there are other considerations. The 34 animals on Dyson's ranch consume approximately 10,000 pounds of food each month. Fifteen of the animals are equines—horses, ponies, and donkeys—and the remaining are dogs, cats, and goats.

Benefactor Lana Calhoun lives in Texas, but that doesn't stop her from donating to Dyson's cause.



David Dyson with a rescued horse. Dyson says his ranch is a sanctuary, not a shelter.

She explained that when she lost her beloved Australian Shepherd mix in March, a friend donated to the ranch in memory of her "Sophie." She said she did her research and looked on the ranch's website. She liked what she saw and sent Dyson a check. She said she received the traditional tax letter but then got something else that surprised and impressed her.

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"I received a lovely handwritten thank-you card from David Dyson," Calhoun told Insight. "I emailed him and said that I was happy to help and gave him my phone number—and the rest is history."

Calhoun, who has a corporate background, has collaborated on a brochure and lent a wealth of knowledge to help Dyson in his vision of the ranch. Calhoun also has vast experience in volunteering at shelters and serving on their boards of directors.

EVEN THOUGH THE two have only been collaborating since May, they have a common goal of making sure the animals are taken care of and that the movement of compassion continues.

"I don't remember who the quote is from," she said. "And I'm probably paraphrasing because I can't remember exactly, but it was basically [that] 'You can tell the nature of a person by how they treat their animals.'"

Calhoun is planning to visit Dyson and the ranch in August, she said.

While Dyson has funded the ranch and has done most of the work himself, he's still in need of more help—more so than donations. He wants to start a "movement" that will strike at the core of every animal lover and stir the patriotism that he feels has been lost. And that, he says, begins with the youth.

Dyson holds a doctorate in education from Vanderbilt University and has completed management institutes at Harvard University and Carnegie-Mellon University. He earned a bachelor's degree in business from Auburn University and a master's in management from Birmingham-Southern College.

But more than anything, Dyson said he wants to start a movement of caring for animals and instilling compassion and character in children, as it will serve them, and the nation, for years to come.

"Teach your kids—teach—it's one thing to do," he said.

"It's one thing to own it. It's one thing to be it, but if you want to stand for something and have an opportunity to attract more people to want to be with you because they know what you stand for... get better—tell the story." ■



A cat sanctuary built by David Dyson to keep cats safe while providing indoor and outdoor experiences.