TWO DEAD HORSES

Despite not guilty verdict, questions linger about horse rescue organization

On a rainy day three days after Christmas in 2015, Douglas County Animal Control Deputy Lee Bartholomew came to the property of Venita McBride in Lookingglass, Oregon, about nine miles southwest of Roseburg. By the end of the day a local veterinarian would euthanize two horses and take five more away.

McBride was cited with two charges of misdemeanor criminal neglect for the horses shot on the property that day.

In the months leading up to the incident, Deputy Bartholomew made multiple visits to the property after horses were reported to be in poor condition by community members. The pasture where one of the horses was shot is fronted by Lookingglass Road, less than a quarter mile from the local elementary school. Pictures of the neglected horse garnered hundreds of shares on social media at the time, paired with a #nomoreDouglasCounty campaign on Facebook.

According to Bartholomew's court testimony, he had spoken with McBride about sending horses to other rescue operations, and she had shown interest in downsizing. Bartholomew previously found rescues for three of McBride's horses in 2014.

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Though animal rescue operations are required to register with the state, there are no laws in Oregon that require annual inspections of animal rescue facilities. Rescue facilities are bound by the same animal neglect laws that govern private citizens.

A person or organization found guilty of neglecting a horse would be barred from owning horses, but not other domestic animals, for five years. If an individual was found guilty of neglecting or abusing other domestic animals, such as dogs or cats, they would not be prevented from operating a horse rescue operation under Oregon law.

Less than two weeks before the horses were euthanized, Bartholomew says McBride told him she was either going to sell them to Wildlife Safari for meat or shoot them herself.

McBride is the owner and operator of two separate horse-related businesses, the currently registered business Triple D Livestock and the now defunct nonprofit Clouds and Clover Race Horse Rescue.

The dividing lines between the two companies are unclear, and an ex-employee and people familiar with the ranch say McBride would take horses as rescues and then sell them for personal profit through her business.

The state of Oregon does not require individual records of horse ownership, making it nearly impossible to track the ownership history of horses.

Tax filings for Clouds and Clover Race Horse Rescue do not show any income to the nonprofit from the adoption or sale of horses. But filings do state that rehabilitated horses will be put up for adoption.

According to Shalynn McCallum, the horses were adopted out from the ranch at a rate of more than $3,000 a year. The income from one adopted horse would have been more than half the income reported by the nonprofit in 2012 and 2013, the last years that taxes were filed.

"No matter how overloaded or bad off the horses are, she'll take them if she can make money off of them," McCallum says in a phone interview with *EW*.

When McCallum worked at the ranch in 2012, she experienced the neglect and abuse firsthand. Stalls were filthy, food wasn't provided and horses suffered without access to veterinary care. McCallum says she saw McBride break an uncooperative horse's nose with a homemade stud halter.

"Anything that didn't have value she would let suffer," McCallum says. According to McCallum, there were three horses on the ranch that were treated well because of their prowess at the racetrack. During the trial, Bartholomew testified that some more valuable and healthy horses were kept in better shape while others suffered.

Veterinarian Buff Rainsberry, tasked with the responsibility of euthanizing the horses, testified that the horses at McBride's ranch were "excruciatingly thin" and were experiencing a "downward spiral of weight loss with nothing being done to change that."

According to Rainsberry, the five horses taken from the property are now in good health.

Replies to comments on the Clouds and Clover Race Horse Facebook page reflect a flippant attitude towards the health of the horses. In a now deleted response to a comment on the organization's Facebook page about the starving horses, the Clouds and Clover account wrote that its critics were small-minded, and that the rescue had shot an old horse with a broken pelvis. The reply concluded "… all the oldies will be shot now. HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!!!!!"

Despite the history of community outrage and run-ins in with animal control, McBride was found not guilty on June 23 for the animal neglect on her property in 2015. McBride's defense, by Portland-based litigator Ivan Karmel, argued the horses on her property were not in her custody and control, and belonged instead to Raymond Griffis, who was living on the ranch at the time.

In testimony, Griffis said the horses were his and that he should be held liable. Griffis was arrested immediately following closing arguments. He said that he was "stepping up" to take the blame for the horses in a conversation outside the courtroom.

According to Bartholomew, Griffis was arrested "because he admitted to having custody."

Bartholomew also added that both parties could be held liable for the neglect.

Although one of the euthanized horses was in a stall about 150 yards from her home and the other was lying in a field along the road, McBride testified that she was unaware of the condition of the horses.

McBride did not offer comment after the closing arguments of the trial and did not respond to a written request for comment.

Deputy District Attorney Ian Ross, who argued the case, appeared overmatched against Karmel, the more experienced defense attorney. Ross spoke in a soft voice, asked few questions during cross examination and on multiple occasions was prompted to speak up by Karmel.

For critics of McBride, a dozen of whom attended the trial to show their support for the prosecution, the result of the case is frustrating but not entirely surprising. "She's always got something up her sleeve," McCallum says. ■