

A safe haven for horsewomen

Union County nonprofit provides shelter for victims of domestic violence, their horses

By SHANNON GOLDEN
The Observer

HOW TO SEEK HELP

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic abuse or intimate partner violence, help is available. For the National Domestic Violence Hotline, call 800-799-7233.

For local support, call La Grande's Shelter From the Storm at 541-963-7226. If you need immediate assistance, call the shelter's 24-hour crisis line: 541-963-9261.

If you are an animal owner seeking local domestic violence support, contact Shotzy Sanctuary at 704-677-3261 or 509-420-0300.



Shannon Golden/The Observer

Marjie Olson spends time with two of her rescue horses in a corral on her Union County property on Monday, Aug. 15, 2022. Olson has plans to move to the East Coast this fall, but will continue to rescue horse and run her nonprofit, Shotzy Sanctuary, wherever she lands.

LA GRANDE — In the fall of 2021, Marjie Olson received a call. For the first few seconds after she picked up, she heard nothing but a woman's sobs.

Olson, the founder of Shotzy Sanctuary — a nonprofit organization that provides shelter for horsewomen of domestic violence — said she was trying to listen for noises in the background, and was poised to call 911 with her other phone.

"What's going on?" Olson remembered asking. "I can't help you unless you talk to me."

Maggie replied on the other end of the line, saying she was currently not in danger — more than anything, she was in shock.

"I didn't believe that she existed," she recalled of Olson.

Maggie, who asked to be identified by only her first name, was seeking help after enduring more than three decades of domestic violence. But she couldn't bear to leave her animals behind. She had reached out to a Facebook support group about her dilemma and someone replied with Olson's number.

Less than a week later, Olson drove 11 hours from her home near Elgin to Southeastern Oregon to pick up Maggie, her daughter, her 34-year-old horse, her three dogs, two cats and her belongings.

"She's a remarkable woman," Maggie said, emphasizing Olson's "kindness and her generosity to care about people she didn't even know."

Now, Maggie, her daughter and Olson are planning to move to the East Coast together. Maggie needs a liver transplant and needs to live closer to a hospital with a donor program. For Olson, the move means a fresh start after a divorce — and a chance to expand her efforts.

Since starting Shotzy Sanctuary in 2019, Olson has helped provide a safe haven for five women, four of whom brought their horses with them — Maggie included. She's hopeful that in less than 10 years, horsewomen in every state will be able to find a safe haven in a Shotzy Sanctuary.

"My motto is, if I can, I will," Olson said. "If I can't, I'm still gonna try."

Assessing need

According to the National Domestic Violence

Hotline, more than one in three women and one in four men in the United States have experienced some form of intimate partner violence, including rape, physical violence and/or stalking. Nearly half of all women and men in the U.S. have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime.

"Whether people realize it or not, every single person knows a woman who has been battered and/or verbally abused or emotionally abused," Olson said.

The Urban Resource Institute and the National Domestic Violence Hotline released a survey in May 2021 that assessed the impact pets can have on a survivor's ability to leave a dangerous situation. Over 97% of respondents reported that being able to keep their pets is an important factor in seeking shelter. Half said they would not consider shelter options for themselves without their pets.

Shelter From the Storm, a La Grande-based organization that offers services for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking, accepts mostly dogs in their safe house — and considers other small animals on a case-by-case basis. According to the shelter's advocacy support coordinator, Candi Nielsen, Shelter From the Storm is one of the only pet-friendly organizations in Eastern Oregon.

"A lot of people feel like their animals are also part of their family," she said. "It would probably make me think twice about actually leaving, and that's scary."

From the emotional support that animals provide

survivors to the fear that their abusive partner may harm or kill the pet, there are many reasons those experiencing abuse want to stay close to their pets. But as of 2021, only about 250 shelters in the U.S. — out of approximately 2,000 shelters and programs — are pet friendly. Many others have arrangements for pets through animal shelters or veterinary offices.

Olson decided to address the gap she saw in the support being offered to victims of domestic violence. She hadn't found a shelter anywhere else in the country that offered services for women, their children, their horses and their other animals.

"A horse is a big investment and to leave it behind would just be devastating, financially as well as emotionally," Nielsen said.

A vision for Shotzy Sanctuary

Olson herself is a survivor of domestic violence. She said that people who know her to be a self-sufficient, outgoing and motivated person are surprised to learn about the abuse she endured during her 20s.

"When you have that attitude and you do go off and do well for yourself, you never expect that woman to be the one that gets abused," she said.

Olson noted that she was blessed to have been raised in a loving family that instilled in her a passion for animals and people from an early age — a passion that helped her get through. She endured what she did in part because she had horses and dogs that she didn't want to leave behind.

Many people see their animals as their children and protect them as any par-

ent would. Escaping domestic violence can present an impossible choice — seek safety or stay, to protect the animals who have helped you through it all.

"That animal is who you cry to," Olson said. "They're also the one that gives you the strength to say, 'I can do this.'"

While cleaning stalls on her property, Olson had the idea for the first-ever safe haven where horsewomen could seek refuge from domestic violence with their children — that would also offer shelter for their animals. She also wanted to provide support for victims who did have a safe place to go but didn't have the means to transport their animals.

By the fall of 2019, Olson had registered Shotzy Sanctuary as a nonprofit organization, with the long-term goal of expanding safe havens for horsewomen across the country.

"We can start helping hundreds of women to keep their animals, whether it's a giraffe or a horse or a donkey," she said of her hopes for the organization.

Decades of devotion

Olson has spent most of her life working with horses. For more than 40 years, she has owned and operated Light Rein Farm and Farrier, through which she has rescued and rehabilitated horses, provided corrective

horseshoeing services and offered training and lessons for students.

Her work has followed her wherever she goes, from

Michigan to North Carolina and beyond. Olson lived in Belize for about six years, rescuing horses and training students for National Barrel Horse Association events. She currently lives in Union County and provides shelter and farrier services to horse owners in Union County.

Throughout her 17 years in Michigan, Olson trained three dozen students, about 20 of whom stayed with her from kindergarten until their early 20s.

"They're all married with babies and master's degrees and doctorates and all that," she said.

Olson has rescued approximately 15 horses since she arrived in Eastern Oregon seven years ago. She often takes in horses that need extra support and care that their previous owners cannot provide them — and finds them a new home or cares for them herself. And although she no longer trains, she has no plans of stopping her farrier services.

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<https://www.wallowaresources.org/east-moraine-celebration-rsvp>

Hosted by the Wallowa Lake Moraines Partnership

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