



A photograph of a man in a white cap and tan vest looking up at a horse in a stable. The background is a light blue wall with a large red rose graphic.

# From Trauma to *Triumph*

**With  
patience  
and love,  
abused  
horses can  
learn to  
trust again**

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When Emma came to Erica and Joost, no one could get anywhere near her. It took Emma six weeks to allow Erica to touch her. Emma belongs to Four Corners Equine Rescue and will be available for adoption as her training progresses.

**C**an the abused horse be convinced to give humans another chance? For the beaten and starved, what is necessary to get them to take a step towards a human, to let a person lay a hand on a wither, stroke their neck? We're not even talking saddling up. And, we're definitely not talking 90 days from start to finish. We are talking about changing the look in an abused horse's eyes from empty to bright, changing their go-to place from fear to curiosity. These unbelievable transformations are taking place, and taking time, lots of time...

### Optimists and pessimists

Erica Hess and Joost Lammers of Heart of the Horses Sanctuary in Santa Fe are especially skilled at transforming abused horses. First and foremost, Erica and Joost are calm, speak thoughtfully, and move with cadenced, nonthreatening steps, mimicking a gentle herd leader.

They know this about horses: some horses are optimists, some are pessimists. The optimists were born and raised with human consideration. "We have Merlin, the eternal optimist," explains Joost. "He has never had anything bad happen to him. When he sees one of us, he runs to the gate, says, 'Take me out.'"

Then there are the pessimists. Erica says they have been abused by people who themselves are most likely hurting. Joost also tries to make sense of why





anyone would mistreat an animal and says, "People feel their own hurt and starvation, and that is what blinds them to not be able to see what is going on around them." He also reminds us that until only 50 or 60 years ago we "broke" horses, tied them to snubbing posts and bucked them out. "That is when you see the souls of horses disappear behind their eyes," he says.

## Changing the horse industry

Both Erica and Joost say that they used to be part of the horse industry-wide problem. Erica says she interacted with horses through dominance, and Joost says he was always in a hurry and cocky around horses. "I could feel some shame about how I was ten years ago, but I always had good intentions and at the time did not know any better," explains Erica.



Joost says Erica has an uncanny intuition about what the abused horse needs to overcome trauma. Erica thinks Emma was traumatized when a foal was taken away from her because she went crazy, calling and desperately trying to run after the foal. Erica and Joost have placed two rescued yearlings in Emma's care as a way to help her get over the loss of her foal.

Joost goes on to say, "What we ultimately want to do is raise awareness and influence the entire horse community, not just the hobby horse owner, but the high-level competitors. We want to rally community around horses and build critical mass so that mistreating horses will be outlawed."

## Time and tea

What the duo knows now is that to help a traumatized horse heal you need to do it on the horse's terms. Says Joost, "Time is a crucial factor, giving the horses the time they need to get over the trauma they acquired. Horses don't forget anything so we need plenty of time to give them lots of new, positive experiences."

Erica explains, "When I work with them, I stop trying to direct them and just be present with them. We have a conversation, like having a cup of tea. I ask them a question then wait, give them time to think before they answer. When they give me an answer they are clear, they say yes or no. I don't think it's magic, I think it's listening, believing the things we notice and the answers we hear. Once they understand we are listening to them, they start communicating clearly. When one of these guys feels heard it is like a magical moment of empowerment for them."

## The Black Stallion moment

Remember that scene in the film, *The Black Stallion*, the one that was partly shot from under water where the young boy gets on the stallion's back for the first time? That's what Joost and Erica are talking about, the slow dance of horse and human, recognizing the moment of agreement.

Joost says, "I have to feel if the horse will allow me to go further. Our job is not to get what we want, but to help him find what we are looking for. I am not there to get something: I am there to help. They don't know what we are looking for. Humans have that ability to envision, but horses have no clue what we want. We need to help them discover what we are asking."

And when it comes to the critical moment of getting on a horse's back or not, Joost says he pays particular attention to how curious the horse is about the idea of Joost being on his back.

"Fear and curiosity rarely inhabit the same space. When there is curiosity, you can work with that. I ask a horse to be drawn in one step further. I'm not waiting for the horse to say, 'It's time to climb on my back,' but I touch him everywhere. I lean into his side. I step on a bucket, and ask him, 'How do you feel?' I lay my upper body over his back. And at one moment, I





Queenie was a rescue at Four Corners Equine Rescue, was adopted out, then returned. The rescue sent her to Joost and Erica who discovered she had bruised ribs and was miserable wearing a bridle. Now she is a different horse, trusting, rideable, and happy.

find we are both in a perfect state of mind and body, and I am on him. I didn't know that was going to happen. It's like that moment in *The Black Stallion*. That kid in the movie put in his time, and he put in his time *lovingly*."

### Shaking loose the trauma

Joost and Erica say that working with abused horses has profoundly changed them. Erica even says that her work with



Queenie used to hate being touched or groomed. But now look at her! She is ready for adoption, see page 6.

horses became so deep that she had to stop instructing humans for two years. Maybe we are too abrupt, too obvious, too on-task. “When I work with rescues, everything has to slow down, and every single moment has a message. It’s a quality of intimacy with another living being that is very rare.”

Joost encountered trauma in his own life, and like many horse owners, has benefited from relationships with horses. “There is a resonance between human and horse when both have experienced trauma. When I work with them, the trauma loosens, and it is allowed to disappear. It is a gift we can give them, and they can give us.”

## New Cooperative Program Helps Severely Abused Horses

Debbie Coburn, founder of Four Corners Equine Rescue, was searching for a special trainer to connect to one of her most traumatized horses, Paddy, who wouldn’t let anyone come within 12 feet of him. Paddy was special to her and she knew he could find his purpose if he was given the chance. Debbie visited Heart of the Horses Sanctuary in Santa Fe, operated by Erica Hess and Joost Lammers, and witnessed Erica working a huge dun gelding, Yogi, at liberty. Debbie asked when Erica planned to start riding him. “Oh no,” said Erica. “We won’t ride Yogi. He doesn’t want us to.”

With that answer, Debbie had found her trainers, ones who would listen to the desires of horses. She brought Paddy to Erica and Joost, and from that moment, a cooperative training program called Chance for a Lifetime was born. Debbie says the program places severely abused horses with Heart of the Horses to “give them the space to heal, time to develop trust, and the invitation to participate with humans willingly, even eagerly.”

“This program is dedicated to helping the horses that need it the most,” said Debbie. “It’s for horses that are physically healthy and could live a full life if they can heal from past trauma.” She says that Erica and Joost’s methods with traumatized horses offers them a new beginning, one that convinces these horses to give humans another chance.

### How You can help

Find out how you can help rehabilitate traumatized horses by volunteering, adopting, sponsoring or making a tax-deductible donation.

- Debbie Coburn, [www.FourCornersEquineRescue.org](http://www.FourCornersEquineRescue.org), 505-334-7220
- Joost Lammers and Erica Hess, [www.heartofthehorses.com](http://www.heartofthehorses.com), 505-474-5480

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