



Homes for horses

The Finger Lakes adoption program is winning awards for giving animals a second life.



Head trainer Julie Kisielewski leads a horse out of the stables at the Purple Haze Center. (Left) Barn manager Damaris Cruz looks on as blacksmith Dean Kisielewski works on one of the horses up for adoption.



Story by **Marci Diehl** | Photos by **Matt Wittmeyer**

I'm about to be swept off my feet.

His name is Vibrance, and he's known as a real ham. He immediately snuffles softly against my hand. Then he takes a nibble on my notebook. His next-stall neighbor and buddy, Graceful Afleet, seems eager to get to know me, too. This place, after all, is all about making introductions.

These guys are among the Ferraris of the horse world, awaiting adoption at the Finger Lakes Thoroughbred Adoption Program's (FLTAP) Purple Haze Center. The nonprofit organization was formed to provide after-care for retired racehorses. It's the only one of its kind in the nation to be located on the grounds of a racetrack—Finger Lakes Gaming & Track in Farmington—and to have the involvement and support of both the track and the National Horsemen's Benevolent Protection Association (HBPA).

A horse like Vibrance is still sleek and powerful, but at 4 years old, his racing days are already over. For many years, thoroughbreds like him have been sold or adopted out of the "back side"—the business and stables part of a racetrack. Owners and trainers simply had to hope that horses that were retired after their short careers went to good homes or stables. Then a few years ago, six horses from Finger Lakes almost ended up at an auction for slaughter. They were saved by the HBPA, but it demonstrated a real need for an innovative program to oversee adoptions.

Donations to build the Purple Haze barn came from the HBPA, Delaware North Companies (which owns Finger Lakes Gaming & Track), funding secured through New York state senator Michael F. Nozzolio, and a grant from the American Humane Association, along with private donations and fund-raising. There was also one angel donor: Wanda Polisseni, vice president of FLTAP's board. Polisseni's contribution enabled completion of the 10,000-square-foot horse barn in 2007, named Purple Haze after her own racing stables in Florida.

Purple Haze was built as a state-of-the-art facility and has become "a national model," says Dave Brown, FLTAP board member and head of the HBPA. Within a month of opening, it won the prestigious Lavin Cup Award from the American Association of Equine Practitioners. Recently, FLTAP and Finger Lakes received a rare national safety certification from the National Thoroughbred Racing Association.

Purple Haze's commitment is complete, down to the purple feed buckets and other touches aimed at making the place feel like a five-star horse hotel. Purple Haze can house up to 16 horses and has four outdoor paddocks, two grass pens and an indoor riding arena. Horses are worked with and ridden often, three to four times a week. And they receive all their physical care—from dentists, farriers, blacksmiths—right at the center.

These horses are not up for adoption to just anyone, even though many will go on to be pets, pleasure horses or retrained for eventing or show. Adoption fees start at around

\$800 and go up from there, and only experienced riders with the means to fully provide for a horse are considered.

"They're not for the faint of heart," says Barbara Havill, owner of two retired thoroughbreds. "A thoroughbred is a skilled racing machine." A seasoned rider like Havill knows the importance of speed limits. As she puts it, "I don't let the genie out of the bottle when I'm riding them."

Head trainer Julie Kisielewski screens all adoptions, makes a thorough assessment of each horse and can make recommendations for potential adoptive owners. She and barn manager Damaris Cruz work with the horses and know them "inside out," Kisielewski says. So they know how each might be retrained. If the horse has had an injury, for example, it might not be suitable as a jumper or for cross-country. But it might make a fine trail horse or do nicely in dressage, she says. "My concern is always for the horse and its welfare."

Some horses come to Purple Haze needing surgery, and FLTAP raises the money to provide them. Mary Barnes, a Rochester city police officer, adopted a horse named Full Marks after the center arranged for neutering. As a stallion, he was so aggressive he had to be kept away from the other horses. Now, his new owner enjoys his "kind eyes" and easy ride at her stable.

Why go to such lengths for these animals? The average age of the racehorses at Purple Haze is 4 to 5 years, though some come in at just 2 years old, some as old as 10. Like any pro athlete, they still have a lot of life ahead of them. But it's their heart, intelligence, skill and desire to please that seem to stir devotion.

"These horses have done so much in their careers," Brown says. "They deserve the best."

FLTAP welcomes the public to visit by appointment, and veterinary students, interns, 4-H groups and others have come for tours.

I left Purple Haze wishing I'd had tastier treats than a bunch of paper to offer. I also left thinking I probably won't get a chance to bring any to Vibrance again. With his looks and personality, chances are he'd be on his way to a new home soon. Sure enough, a few weeks later, both Vibrance and his stall mate, Graceful Afleet, had been adopted. Thanks to FLTAP, racehorse speed can apply to the adoption process, too.

For more information call 585-924-9510 or go to www.fingerlakestap.org.

For more horse tales, turn to page 48

FLTAP's annual fundraiser, the Round Up Dinner and Silent Auction, takes place from 6 to 10 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 10, at Finger Lakes Casino and Racetrack (across from the Purple Haze Center). Tickets are \$50 a person, or \$500 for a table of 10 (which includes two bottles of wine and commemorative wine glasses), available at the Purple Haze Center Barn, 5757 Route 96, Farmington, or by calling 585-924-9510.

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The angel donor

When Wanda Polisseni comes to visit her racehorses at the Finger Lakes Casino and Track in Farmington, roughly 40 pounds of baby carrots come with her. Along with the treats come her love for horses and dedication to providing them with long and happy lives.

Polisseni is vice president of the board of the Finger Lakes Thoroughbred Adoption Program and a major donor: Her contribution made it possible to build FLTAP's Purple Haze center at the track.

"FLTAP was the golden opportunity for Finger Lakes," she says. "It didn't take me 10 minutes into the conversation with the board to decide to fund Purple Haze." In fact, Polisseni, well known for philanthropy, calls it "the proudest of all the things I've done. I'm thrilled to be part of the adoption program."

Horses have been a part of Polisseni's life since childhood, when her family boarded them. Now she races and breeds thoroughbreds, trotters and pacers, and she says Finger Lakes should be considered "the Saratoga of the West" in

the state, with the award-winning FLTAP and Purple Haze located right at the track.

When a horse comes through the program needing surgery, Polisseni is often one who sees that the horse receives whatever medical care it needs. She has saved many of their lives this way.

Polisseni won't let her retired horses go to just anyone. FLTAP has a "very selective" group of horses—like Tough Shipmate, who gave one visitor a heartfelt "muzzle-to-muzzle" kiss. He once raced for Polisseni.

Her formula for keeping them happy? Give care and affection (and baby carrots): "Most of my babies are like that," she says, laughing with obvious pride.

But she says she gets much more from them in return. Decades ago, grieving over the loss of her teenage daughter, Polisseni found solace through frequent visits with her horses. "When you're around them, you forget about everything. You can look into their eyes and see they understand what you're feeling."

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Story of an adoption

Deep in the countryside outside Branchport, N.Y., handsome Rio Dinero—great-great-grandson of the legendary racehorse Secretariat—grazes in acres of pasture with his new best buddy, Top Shotta. The two retired racers gambol across the grass and woody trails. Rio, now owned by Barbara Havill, is a new competitor in the equestrian sport of dressage. But if it weren't for the Finger Lakes Thoroughbred Adoption Program, it could have been a very different picture. Rio Dinero might not be alive.

Rio's sire, River Keen, won \$1.7 million in his career, and Rio was bred by one of racing's training elite. At just 5 years old, Rio reached the end of his racing career and was accepted into the adoption program. He was adopted, but then returned. The adopter wanted a Grand Prix jumper but was told Rio Dinero would never make it.

Worse, the first adopter told FLTAP that Rio had EMP—a neurological disease of the spine—"and should be put down immediately." The staff at FLTAP, however, saw no such evidence of the disease. With funds

provided through donations, they were able to have Rio examined by no fewer than five equine veterinarians. Each diagnosis came back negative.

Havill has had horses all her life and had bought thoroughbreds but never adopted one. In 2009, she went searching for another horse because was so lonely, he was withdrawing and refusing to eat. After looking at the FLTAP website's list of horses up for adoption, she met with the staff and took a test ride on Rio.

"I saw him at Purple Haze at 2 p.m. in the afternoon and was writing a check before 3 o'clock," Havill says.

Havill, who has competed in the Stuart Horse Trials, dreams of Rio competing as an event horse one day. "They're competitive athletes," she says. "They've been training all of their lives, and they know how to behave."

But for now, she's happy with his class-clown personality and clear athletic talent. It thrills her to see Rio and Shotta enjoying life. "It's my relaxation," she says. "Loving horses is something like having a disease." **C**

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