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Wild horses did drag her away

It took 32 years for Neda DeMayo's dream to come true

SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

Neda DeMayo has always been fascinated by horses, especially wild horses.

She vividly recalls an incident during her youth in rural Connecticut — going outside to play and being told by friends that she had just missed seeing a pack of horses run freely through the streets.

While the horses most likely belonged to a neighbor, DeMayo says, "In my mind I thought they were wild horses, and I looked everywhere for them. Everywhere."

That theme would become a constant in her life.

At the tender age of 6, DeMayo saw mustangs being chased by helicopters. The anguish and fear she felt left an indelible impression, and she vowed then and there to help preserve a habitat for wild horses. It would take 32 years, but she kept that promise in 1998 when she founded The American Wild Horse Sanctuary, a project of the nonprofit organization Return to

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HORSES: A labor of love

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Freedom.

DeMayo began taking riding lessons when she was 5 years old, and spent much of her youth and adolescence on horseback. Then she took a hiatus from equestrian pursuits — traveling through Europe, studying theater, relocating to Los Angeles and establishing careers as a holistic practitioner and a celebrity fashion stylist. Through it all, she was saving and preparing for her ultimate goal of creating a safe haven for animals.

But DeMayo's priorities shifted after she had a serious automobile accident — her second in a year. "I realized that I needed to get clear about what I really wanted to do with my life," she says, "Because you don't know how long it's gonna last."

While considering her next steps, DeMayo saw an expose about "canned" hunts on private property. It upset her so much she finally decided it was time to get serious about her long-term goal.

DeMayo spent two years learning about habitat conservation programs and studying with a horse whisperer. She worked with nonprofit groups to find out how to operate that type of organization. And she traveled across California and New Mexico and scoured magazines in a bid to find a suitable location for her sanctuary. She also researched land grants and leases available through the Bureau of Land Management. She came to re-

alize that to stay true to her dream, she would have to start her own nonprofit and turn to friends and family for help.

DeMayo found a 300-acre ranch north of Santa Barbara, near Lompoc, that made an ideal sanctuary — and an excellent retirement site for her parents. DeMayo and her parents pooled their resources and bought the land, then her parents moved there.

Running the ranch is a full-time job, yet DeMayo isn't even on the payroll. Her sanctuary includes three full-time paid staffers and operates through grants, private donations and in-kind support from manufacturers and veterinarians. Because the sanctuary's operational costs are about \$15,000 per month, DeMayo says, "We are still hand-to-mouth." The sanctuary is a labor of love.

The Return to Freedom Ranch is home to about 100 animals, including mustangs, burros and other creatures. Wild horses run freely with their family units intact, and the human interactions on the ranch help educate people about the problems associated with destruction of natural habitats.

The perseverance, community spirit and leadership DeMayo displayed in turning her dreams into reality — and the level of commitment needed to maintain it — are simply a reflection of what she observes around her. "We have a lot to learn from nature," she says. "We can't throw away the very thing that sustains us."

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Neda DeMayo