

Young Girl Donates Birthday Gifts to TRF

This story was written by Jim Hilley of the Sumter Item and re-printed with their permission

When Amber Meeker's 11th birthday came around in April, she made an unusual wish. "She said I don't need presents, what can we do to help animals?" Amber's mom, Paige Meeker said. It took a while to match the request with the right program, but eventually it was decided the family would collect donations for a unique program at Wateree River Correctional Institution that helps rehabilitate inmates by teaching them to care for retired thoroughbred racehorses.

On Friday (July 17th), Amber and her family, along with South Carolina Department of Corrections Director Bryan Stirling, South Carolina Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation President Bill Cox and a handful of family friends were able to visit Seabiscuit Stables at Wateree River where the program is housed to present the donations.

"I love horses," Amber said. And that's not the looking-out-the-window-as-the-car-passes-by-the-pasture-and-shouting-"Neigh"-out-the-window kind of love of horses. That's the "I-ride-three-times-a-week" type of love for horses.

You see, Amber's family actually owns one of the 5-foot-tall, finicky eating, broken-but-not-housebroken, 800 to 1,100-pound furry beasts. Amber started riding when she was 5, her mom Paige said. Amber and her sister Piper don't just ride horses either.

"Next year I am going to be allowed on the Hammond team," Amber said confidently. That would be the Hammond School Equestrian Team in Columbia, which is the reigning five-time state champion in South Carolina Independent School Association equestrian events. The team is coached by Jay McMillion, who happens to be Amber's coach as well. All of this is straying off the riding path, of course.

Amber Meeker's birthday gift is a very good thing for a valuable program. The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation program at Wateree River not only helps retired thoroughbred race horses find homes, it also provides an opportunity for inmates to learn important lessons. Twelve inmates at a time rotate through the program, Cox said. The inmates must learn all the skills necessary to care for and feed the horses.

"They catch them, they brush them, saddle 'em," Cox said. "After they ride them they have to un-tack and brush them out. They have to clean their water troughs and get manure out of the pasture."

Stirling said the program is a great public-private partnership that offers a lot of benefits for the inmates and the horses, all of which have been raced. "Our inmates gain a skill and can get a job," he said. "It teaches them personal responsibility and how to care for others. You have to work hard to be here because if you don't, others will step right in." He told Amber he was grateful for the donations she collected and presented the family with a plaque for their efforts on behalf of the horses. Stirling said it is especially appreciated because funding for the program is lagging down the stretch compared to where it was before the belt-tightening that took place due to the Great Recession.

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For more information on the S.C. Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, call Cox at (803)-243-0034.



Bill Cox Amber Meeker Bryan Stirling



The Meeker Family



The Meekers Tour Seabiscuit Stables

