

# Simple twist of equestrian fate saves horses' lives

Understanding what motivates a horse is key to connection

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Special to the Gateway

At least 60 horses owe their very lives to Chuck Kraft. With a very successful commercial sign business that has numerous accounts in California and Japan, Kraft, along with his wife Ruth and longtime friend Charlene Bantula also have another business called Horse Handling, and have dedicated their lives to saving horses whose owners would have sent them to their deaths.

A resident of Key Peninsula for the last two years, with more than 15 years of horse handling experience, Chuck got a lot of his inspiration and savvy in horsemanship from world-renowned master horseman Pat Parelli, a personal friend of theirs.

"One of the biggest problems that many people have with horses is that they don't allow them to be horses," Kraft explained. "You have to allow the horse to be a horse. Then you must cause the horse's ideas to be your ideas, and finally, cause your ideas to be the horse's ideas."

Chuck spoke of the differences between what motivates humans and horses. "We are predators, just like cougars and bears. Horses are prey animals. They react by flight of

fear. While humans are motivated by praise, recognition, and material things, horses are motivated by survival, comfort, games and dominance. Once a person realizes and applies that awareness, working with horses becomes a simple thing."

Horses that have been biters, kickers, strikers (with their feet), and pushers or buckers, all deemed as problem horses, some of which have even put their owners in hospitals, have been saved from slaughter and given a new lease on life because of Kraft.

"We create an alternative to euthanasia," he said. "What happens to a horse that someone decides they cannot safely be around? They end up at the nearest auction, where they are snatched up for the meat market. Sending a horse to auction ultimately condemns them to death. It's killing your horse, but in a round-about way."

"What most people don't get is that once a horse's psychological needs are met, they become docile. So if a person can savvy prey animal leadership, the partnership and harmony between a horse and its owner just blossoms. You never knock the try or curiosity out of a horse. And you never punish them for being a horse. You have to let them be what they are, but with guidelines."

Chuck stressed that he doesn't need any more horses. "I'm not looking to expand this business," he said. But sometimes fate knocks on his door at times and



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Chuck Kraft holds a carrot stick, a tool used for horse handling that is actually an extension of the hand, allowing the handler to be at a safer distance during the initial stage of contact with a horse with which they are unfamiliar.

places where he least expects it.

Fate came calling on Chuck Kraft about a few weeks ago, when he had gotten lost in Graham while looking for an address. He went in to a health food store ask-

ing for directions, and as it turned out, a woman who worked there, learning that Chuck worked with problem horses, told him of a Belgian stallion that was owned by a horse breeding ranch where she also worked a second job. She told him that the horse could not be handled, that it was dangerous, and that the owners felt there was no alternative but to shoot the animal.

Chuck just couldn't take on another animal, but he hated the thought that another horse was on the verge of being destroyed. But what could he do? It was that same afternoon that he stopped in at Stroh's Feed in Gig Harbor and asked them if they knew anyone who was working with draft horses. They gave him the number of a local man who had a draft horse and was looking for another as a companion to his Percheron mare.

Kraft took the man's number and gave him a call, explaining the situation. Two days later, they went to look at the horse. It was a gorgeous animal. Chuck went in to

the horse's pasture and began communicating with the stallion through gestures and movement. The horse didn't know what to make of this at first. No one had ever used these tactics on him. But Chuck persisted, affording the horse its space and insisting, through his gestures, that the horse in turn respect his. The man stood in awe as he saw communication between man and animal as he had never seen it before. A transition of understanding between a one-ton animal and a 200-pound man was taking place before his very eyes. It was magical. And every single movement by man and beast alike made sense. Here was curiosity, understanding, respect and the foundations of affection, all in their primitive, purest forms, being conveyed and transferred back and forth, repeatedly, between the two.

After nearly an hour, Chuck took the man aside, explaining that this was not a dangerous animal. The man could see that for himself, but valued the horseman's assessment greatly. The stallion was only 3

years old, was being kept in a pasture adjacent to two other stallions, and no one had really tried communicating with him in any way other than with fear and distrust — until now.

The owner of the stallion asked the Gig Harbor man if he would like to have the horse. The man said he would be very glad to take the horse. The owner, feeling relieved and sensing that this animal would have a good home, offered the horse at no cost to the man. It was decided, however, that the stallion should be gelded and allowed to recuperate for a couple of weeks before taking possession of him. "No problem," said the owner. "We'd be glad to do that!"

Just one more small detail, remains. The man who saw magic that day between a horseman and a mighty stallion, the man who will soon be the proud owner of this magnificent animal, is none other than this author.

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Horses on Chuck Kraft's Key Peninsula property have plenty of room to roam and play as they are allowed to run in packs. Kraft can get the horses to turn with a simple wave of his hand.