



STAFF PHOTO BY BRYAN TERRY

Shawn and Natalee Cross — with their children Kaitlyn, 6, and Dakota, 8 — stand with some of the 20 horses they rescued more than a year ago.

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Horse rescuers seek hay, grain, funding

Blaze's Tribute continues to feed 12 of 20 in malnourished herd

By Ann Kelley
Staff Writer

JONES — Donations of hay and grain are needed to help a horse rescue service maintain a herd of horses saved from starvation 13 months ago.

Blaze's Tribute Equine Rescue took in 20 neglected and malnourished horses removed from a field in McClain County on Dec. 23, 2001.

Today, the equine rescue owners, Shawn and Natalee Cross, continue to pay about \$100 per week to feed 12 of the horses and more to maintain their health.

Blaze's Tribute Equine Rescue gets no state assistance and is in need of donations, Natalee Cross said.

"I don't want to risk the horses losing even a pound of what they have gained back," she said. "Times are tough right now, especially with it being winter, and we are desperate to keep these guys' bellies full."

Shawn and Natalee Cross started Blaze's Tribute Equine Rescue two years ago to provide short-term care for neglected horses. The organization is named for a quarter horse who was injured when her legs fell through the wooden floor of a horse trailer while the Crosses were escaping the fire that ravaged parts of Logan County in September 2001.

Rather than attempt surgery to repair her injuries, a veterinarian recommended Blaze be euthanized, but the Crosses refused to end her life.

Blaze has since recovered and is spending the remainder of her days grazing with the horses rescued by the family.

Natalee Cross said in December 2001, a neighbor had a McClain County deputy investigate the 20 neglected horses and, when the owner could not be found, took steps to have the horses removed.

The Crosses were contacted by an official at the Oklahoma City Animal Shelter about caring for the herd until law enforcement could find the owner and the matter was put to rest in McClain County District Court.

Starvation and parasites had eaten away the horses' muscles and their skeletons poked through their worn coats.

They walked slowly on broken shoes with their heads drooped for lack of energy, Shawn Cross said.

Natalee Cross said the field was blanketed with weeds, but barren of edible grasses. The Crosses found new feed buckets on the property, but no grain to fill them.

"All of the neighbors came out that day to watch us load the horses," Natalee Cross said. "They told us how grateful they were that we were taking them, because they were spared having to watch them slowly die and not be able to do anything about it."

One of the yearling studs, Slim, died five days after the move.

It took several weeks of slow feeding and tender care before the other 19 horses had the energy to hold their heads high again.

One of the mini-paint horses, Miss Runner, became well enough to carry her foal and give birth in April 2002.

On Sept. 4, Carolyn Maxwell of Bethany, signed over her legal right to 12 of the horses and they became the Crosses' property.

Natalee Cross said eight of those 12 horses have been adopted.

She said Maxwell has denied ownership of the remaining eight horses. The legal ownership of those horses is in limbo until the rightful owner attempts to claim them, she said.

The *Oklahoman* attempted to contact the McClain County district attorney concerning any possible criminal charges pending in the matter, but telephone calls were not returned.

The cost of feeding the herd averages about \$100 per week, which the Crosses are paying out of their own pockets, along with paying the more than \$1,500 in veterinarian bills to maintain their health.

Natalee Cross said they did receive enough donations to purchase the West Nile Virus vaccine for the horses.

Shawn Cross said people are welcome drop off donations and visit the horses. The Crosses also would be willing to pick up any hay or grain donations.

To donate, or for more information about Blaze's Tribute Equine Rescue, call 399-3084.

Cash donations for the equine rescue may be sent in care of Volunteers for Animal Welfare, P.O. Box 20061, Oklahoma City, OK 73156.