

Proud Spirit Sanctuary:

Home to Rescued Horses and Dogs

by Lavanya Sunkara

Melanie and her husband, Jim Bowles, have been rescuing animals for two decades. After retiring as fire fighters, the couple dedicated their lives to helping animals in need. They started the Proud Spirit Horse Sanctuary 21 years ago, which is now the largest and longest running in the country.



When I flew to Georgia to interview Melanie Sue Bowles, founder of the Proud Spirit Horse Sanctuary, I expected to spend a quiet weekend walking the pastures among the horses and playing with the dozen dogs at her house. But I was in for a surprise. On the way to her house from the airport, we found three abandoned puppies on the side of the road. They looked dirty and starved. While it was a sunny day, the temperatures were sure to drop at sun down and the puppies would not have made it through the night.

After parking the car, Melanie and I walked to the puppies, who were probably no more than eight weeks old. They were shivering and huddled together for protection, but with curious little eyes.

"Come here little ones, you are safe now," said Melanie as she approached one of the pups with her arms outstretched. We took a few towels from the trunk and picked each one up and placed them in the back seat. "I never understand how anyone could leave dogs like that," said Melanie, with tears welling up in her eyes. "You guys are breaking my heart," she said glancing at the pile of pups in the back seat.

Melanie and her husband, Jim Bowles, have been rescuing animals for two decades. After retiring as fire fighters, the couple dedicated their lives to helping animals in need. They started the Proud Spirit Horse Sanctuary 21 years ago, which is now the largest and longest running in the country. They have intervened on behalf of nearly 400 horses and currently care for more than 50 horses. The horses are not adopted, and stay there for their entire lives. Melanie has authored two books on her horse rescue work, *The Horses of Proud Spirit* and *Hoof Prints: More Stories from Proud Spirit*.

Melanie's latest, *The Dogs of Proud Spirit*, delves into the canines who've become a part of their family. All of them had been abandoned, placed in shelters, or sent to the vet for euthanasia because they didn't meet breed standards. Currently, the family lives in the quiet town of Lincolnton, Georgia, on 150 acres—where the horses run freely as part of a herd, while the dogs live with them in the house.



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Upon arriving at the house, with three abandoned roadside pups, we were greeted by eager dogs and a smiling Jim. "Look who we found!" I said, carrying two of the pups in my arms. Jim immediately took one of them, and allowed her to lick his face. The puppy wagged her tail and Jim beamed.

"If he could save all the pups in the world, he would," said Melanie with love in her eyes. The two have been married for 26 years, and their love for each other and the animals in their care continues to amaze me.

After feeding and cleaning the pups, we all gathered around a campfire that evening. The canines in residence greeted the new pups with their tails wagging. One of the Proud Spirit dogs, Louis, decided to take on mommy duty by warming up the pups with his body and licking their fur clean, as the puppies snoozed on my lap.

A Home Full of Dogs

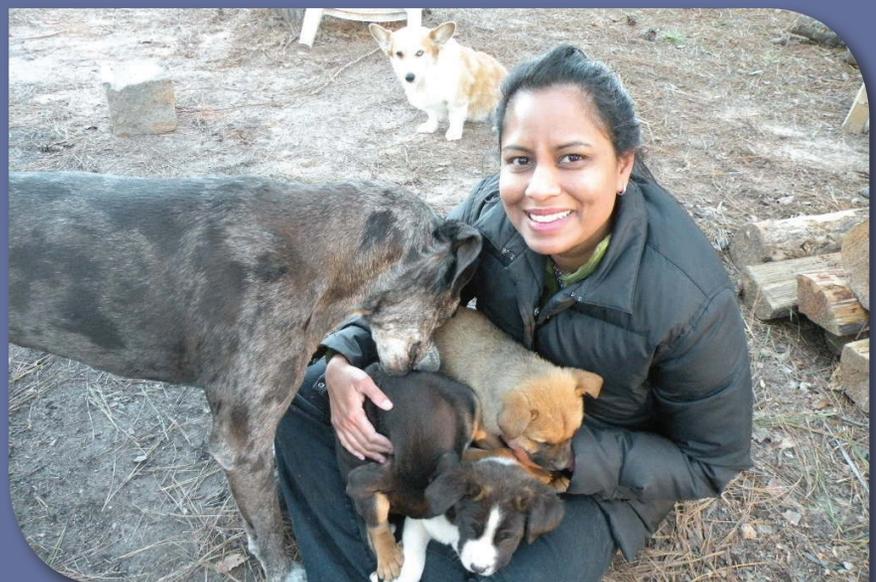
Two years ago, Jim and Melanie's friends found Louis, a Catahoula Leopard, near death in Florida. He was emaciated, with gun pellets in his body, and suffering from heartworm disease. The Bowles's friends tried to get him adopted. When no one came forward, Melanie drove all the way to Florida to bring him home.

Together, the couple nursed him back to health. Louis is named after Louis Zamperini, World War II hero written about in *Unbroken*, and has definitely been through his share of suffering throughout most of his life. Today, he is a much-loved member of the Proud Spirit family. Towering over the rest of the dogs, he takes on the role of a guardian and always follows Jim around.

One of the recent additions to the Bowles's household is the beautiful two-year-old pit bull mix, Winston, named after Winston Churchill. He was the size of a rabbit when Melanie and Jim found him and his littermates on the side of the road, near their ranch. They were scared, starving, and covered in fleas and ticks. Melanie was able to find homes for Winston's siblings, but he stayed with them. "He's

the most active of them all and a little rambunctious," said Melanie recalling the time when he used to bring sofa pillows outside to play.

While Louis keeps guard and playful Winston keeps things interesting, there are three fluff-ball corgis – Penny, Cricket, and Kirby – who, with their little legs, climb up to my knees and plead for attention. They were rescued from shelters and animal hospitals. They were ordered to be euthanized because they weren't "perfect" purebred puppies. One has a blue right eye, another a left blue eye, and the other has a floppy ear. Their imperfections; however, don't interfere with the unconditional love that they freely give. The corgis follow Melanie around, and often keep her company under her desk.





A corgi mix named Gunner, who has been with the Bowles's family for more than 15 years, has spent every single night on their bed at their feet. They rescued him from a shelter where he spent two years. "Gunner is my boy. He never takes his eyes off of me," Melanie said, looking at the senior dog whose life goal seemed to be about pleasing her. In his youth, Gunner accompanied Melanie on her book tours and road trips.

The rest of the dogs – four hounds named Lucy, Trixie, Trudi, and Daisy – and a tall and graceful, Chloe, complete the pack of rescues. The Bowles's recently lost one of their furry family members, beautiful Bessie, who they rescued as a pup from an overcrowded shelter 15 years ago.

Inside the house, the living room carpet is spread with dog toys and the couch is covered with snoozing pups. Next to a window overlooking the horses, there's an old coffee table turned into a dog bed with comfy cushions. Feeding time is when the little dogs get their portions in small bowls, and the big dogs get second rounds in their big bowls. Dogs are always running in and out of the house, playing with their adopted brothers and sisters, staring at the ponies and basking in the sunshine on the porch. At night, the dogs congregate in the bedroom, which has cushy beds against all four walls.

"They make me laugh and they remind me to live in the moment; to truly appreciate and be grateful for this moment," said Melanie.

Lives Dedicated to Rescue

It was such a pleasure to see this family in their element during my visit, including the rescue of three little helpless pups. That night, Melanie and Jim prepared a room in the barn for the babies to sleep. Melanie filled a crate with warm blankets and put in treats to entice the pups. Jim set up water bowls and a space heater. The puppies explored the room, jumping on one another and smelling everything in their way before settling in their crate and falling asleep.

When asked how she stays positive while continually encountering abused and neglected animals, Melanie said: "It's a waste of time and energy to lament the fact that evil exists, or to question how or why abuse and cruelty

happens. I'd rather put my energy into making things right for the lives I'm able to touch and rejoice in the successes. When we bring a new animal into our fold we don't dwell on his or her past or rail on about the abusive former owner. We focus on right now...this dog is here, and he is safe and his future is secure."

At Proud Spirit Horse Sanctuary, I have seen so much love and experienced the joy of being around so many happy animals. That's the beauty of animals—no matter what they've been through, they respond in kindness and are loyal to those who care for them.

The next morning, Melanie sought help from her friends to find loving homes for the puppies we found. Melanie and Jim Bowles are firm believers in the adage, "The purpose of life is to live a life of purpose," and they set a fine example of it in the way they live – caring for animals and inspiring others daily.

The Dogs of Proud Spirit Book

To read more about the dogs of Proud Spirit, pick up a copy of Melanie's book, *The Dogs of Proud Spirit*. It is full of fun and heartwarming tales of the rescues that have enriched their lives. The book is a testament to the truth that animals teach us in the giving of boundless joy and unconditional love if we are willing to open our hearts and homes to them. 🐾

How to Help

- * Visit www.HorsesofProudSpirit.com to learn more and make a donation.
- * Before you buy from a breeder, consider rescuing instead. Visit www.Petfinder.com or your local shelter to find your next best friend.
- * Hug a dog or two. It'll do you some good.