

## What's the Fuss?

*The first chapter of the story of the "Markdale horses"*

By: Krista Mills

It hit the news on March 6, 2013 – another tragic story, another situation gone horribly, horribly wrong for dozens of horses.

On the evening of March 6<sup>th</sup> Brenda Thompson of [Whispering Hearts Horse Rescue](#) in Hagersville, Ontario was contacted by a government agency asking for help. It was a familiar subject - on a farm in Markdale (a small community in Grey County, west of Barrie) there were dozens of emaciated and neglected horses.



Early in the morning of Thursday, March 7<sup>th</sup> Brenda set off on the 4-hour drive to Markdale to assess the situation. None of the horses were being seized by a government agency, but the owner of the horses realized she needed help and agreed to surrender two of them to Whispering Hearts. After a long day of heartbreak, hard work, and eight hours of driving, Brenda arrived home in the evening with two starving horses. Dozens had been left behind.

The next day Brenda went back. The farm owner needed help and the horses needed help, and Brenda cannot turn her back on those in need. This is not a case of intentional cruelty – this is a situation where things got out of hand, and help was either not offered or not accepted until it was far too late for many. Brenda spent the day offering farm management advice, feeding, cleaning, and basic labour in the barn and left that afternoon with another eight horses on their way to a new life.



Another 12-hour day away from Whispering Hearts, where barn chores, grooming, feeding, answering e-mails and telephone calls and Facebook

posts, and records upkeep awaited. And now there were ten horses in need of immediate assessment and attention.

Another sleepless night for Brenda and her husband Dave, another night spent checking on the new rescues every few hours to make sure they were all still standing.

Saturday, March 9<sup>th</sup>. No trip to Markdale in the cards today, not because there are no horses in need left there, but because the ten already surrendered to Whispering Hearts needed assessment, veterinary attention, grooming, medicating, and documentation.

The following day, Sunday, was set aside for weighing, measuring, and taking intake photographs of the ten new arrivals. I can write about this day from personal experience as I went to Whispering Hearts to help take the intake photographs. It was a gorgeous, warm, sunny day and hope was in the air with this first taste of spring.

The Markdale mares and geldings were in the arena, the three stallions were in their stalls, and to my untrained eye the situation certainly looked much better than the last time I had been out, in November, to see the “Milagro’s Journey” horses. Certainly far, far, far from good – but better. Brenda and I and two other volunteers photographed each horse to note its overall condition and health issues specific to each horse. I commented to Brenda that Whispering Hearts is the only place in the world where I am



comfortable lying down in a stall under a stallion’s belly to take a picture.

Four hours later, we were in the last stallion’s stall, just wrapping up. Each horse had been “weighed” (with a weight tape) and measured, and all the file photographs had been taken. The hoof neglect, the filth and feces and shavings embedded into their chests and bellies, the lice, the botfly eggs, the matted manes and tails, and the injuries and wounds had all been documented.

Frantic calls suddenly came from the arena – a horse was lying down and could not get up. I started remembering the Milagro pictures I had seen; I did not want to experience that personally. However, it’s kind of funny what you can do when you suddenly find yourself in a situation where someone needs help. I would have liked to have panicked and run right out of the barn and gotten in my truck and driven home to await the posting of the outcome on Facebook. But I did not – this horse’s very real and immediate struggle against death was happening in front of my eyes and it needed to be documented.

Brenda rushed into the arena. Dave was sent for, the arena was cleared of volunteers, and the only sound was Prince’s laboured breathing. He was stretched out on his side,

covered in sweat, and he was in such excruciating pain that his lips were pinched up over his teeth and his eyes were glazed. As I think back on that moment, I am grateful that I was behind a camera, which seems to remove you a step from things happening right in front of you. My heart was breaking – for poor Prince, who had come so far only to come to the end (so it seemed to me), and for Brenda and Dave, whose determination was showing in their eyes only through the tears and desperation. They were NOT giving up on him, no matter what.

No one knew what was wrong with Prince. Was it colic? His fat and muscles had all been absorbed by his body in his struggle to survive, had his body started consuming its own organs - was it heart failure, or kidney failure? Prince's blood work had not yet come back as it had only been taken the day before. Without knowing what his real condition was, many medications given to him could do him even further damage. What can you do to save a horse seemingly dying before your eyes if you do not know what is wrong?



Brenda pulled, Dave pushed. Prince finally struggled to his feet. Even the chickens were quiet as everyone held their breath to see if he could stay up. Dave gently started to walk Prince around. Every time he stopped Prince would try to lie down again. In case it was colic (which can kill a horse if it rolls and causes its stomach to twist) the one thing we knew we could do was prevent Prince from rolling. Around and around the arena Dave led him, while Brenda frantically tried to reach the on-call veterinarian. Prince's

back legs were wobbling as he walked, and every few minutes he would drop to the ground and the struggle to get him up began again. A muscle relaxant and pain reliever was given, half a normal dose, in the hope that at the very least it would ease his suffering.

Almost an hour goes by. Prince is again stretched out on the ground, although the drugs have started to take effect and his breathing is starting to ease and the sweat is starting to dry; he is no longer in agonizing pain. The question remains – why? What is wrong? Finally the vet arrived (she had been at another emergency call, and had been going from one emergency to the next for 36 hours – she did arrive as quickly as she could). She assessed Prince and determined that he was not in heart or renal failure, and it was not colic. Twenty people exhaled in relief. As best as she could determine, Prince's muscles were so wasted that the opening between his small and large intestines was not opening properly, so there was a build-up of gas which he could not release. Gas! Rolling the dice and giving him the muscle relaxant may actually have saved his life.





Prince was soon back on his feet. He went straight to the hay and started munching away as though nothing at all had happened. I swear he looked around at everyone, at the blankets and vet's gloves and various "emergency situation detritus" scattered around the arena and looked at us as if to say, "What's the fuss?"

Yes, what's the fuss? Just another day at Whispering Hearts, actively saving lives. Well, that was not just another day for me and it is firmly etched in my memories, in the "do not look at" compartment. But I keep pulling those pictures out and looking at them. This situation cannot be ignored. Prince did not find himself in this condition on his own. Prince and all of the other horses at the Markdale farm find themselves in this condition because of the failure of people – horse owners, veterinarians, the public, and the government agencies put in place to prevent cruelty and neglect.



On March 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> four more horses were surrendered to Whispering Hearts from the Markdale farm; two were brought home, and two miniature horses were re-homed by Whispering Hearts. This means fourteen horses were saved, from that one farm. There were also horses boarded there who have since been moved, and other horses have been re-homed by the farm owner herself.

A few horses will remain at the Markdale farm, but they will not be abandoned. Brenda will continue to make the 4-hour drive on a regular basis to help ensure that they are being looked after. Brenda is also monitoring and assisting with another case in nearby Dundalk which has not hit the news.

The mandate of Whispering Hearts is to help horses in need; not to judge, not to persecute, and not to showcase. Brenda tries to work with farm owners in need, and

her hope is that there is not a horse owner out there who is in dire straits and is afraid to come to her for help.

Whispering Hearts is now working with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the Ontario Equestrian Federation on this case. More needs to be done by the government agencies to help prevent these situations before it is too late. The Markdale farm is not a unique situation.

This year has been extremely difficult for many horse owners. First the hay crops were devastated by worms, then severe drought hit. The price of hay has skyrocketed, and we are having to go further and further afield to find hay. The sudden racetrack closures have left hundreds of racing stables in a state of limbo, with thousands of horses facing an uncertain future. Horse owners who were just managing now find themselves unable to cope, and finding homes for horses is all but impossible.



This has been the busiest winter for Whispering Hearts since its start in 2008. Twenty-nine critical cases have been taken in over the last four months.

The five “Milagro’s Journey” horses who arrived in November have now been rehabilitated to the point where they are ready to start their training. The Markdale horses have only just begun their journey. They have been vet-checked, had blood profiles and fecal tests (for internal parasites) done, been de-wormed, de-loused, and groomed. They are now on a structured feeding program to slowly bring up their weights. The three stallions will be gelded once they are healthy enough for that to be done. It is a long, long road ahead for them and they will most likely be at Whispering Hearts for at least a year.

There are now 63 horses at Whispering Hearts Horse Rescue. Some have completed their journey and are awaiting new homes. Some are assured of living out their lives at the rescue and are awaiting sponsors. And the rest are still traveling their road of recovery. Whispering Hearts welcomes your support – whether by way of financial donations, donations of needed items such as shavings, vitamin supplements, or food, or by volunteering your time.

To following the ongoing stories of the Markdale horses, the Milagro’s Journey horses, or to help support Whispering Hearts, please join the Facebook [page](#) or visit the website at [www.whhrescue.com](http://www.whhrescue.com).

As I was finishing this story, a comment was posted on Facebook in response to my question of how the people of Whispering Hearts manage to do this day in and day out. The response brought a tear to my eye as it really does sum it up:



*They can do it because they have seen so many times the happy results of their dedication and hard work. They can do it because they are passionate about making the lives of these magnificent animals better. They can do it because they are willing to make the personal sacrifices. They can do it because it is not about them, it is about the horses. They do it in spite of the heartache and the emotional pain, because they know they are making a difference ... one horse at a time. The joy of seeing the happy endings exceeds the sadness of losing the ones that were beyond help.*

*Everyone who supports WHHR in whatever way they can is doing it, too.*

Thank you so much for your care, your concern, and your assistance – you really ARE making a difference!

KMM/13

