

Barney Gives Back



This is the story of Barney, a gentle giant whose life was changed through the transformative power of love. He has since touched many human hearts with his grace and sensitivity, offered in spite of all he has been through.

**By man u eLa st eFan ,
equine photographer**

This portrait of Barney was taken in October 2014 at Freedom Valley Horse Rescue. INSET: Barney at his new home with Cheri Davidson, in May 2015.

In 2014, I learned about Christine and Howie Welch and their work at the Freedom Valley Horse Rescue in Omeme, Ontario. Wanting to help in any way I could, I offered my services as a professional photographer and took portraits of all their rescued horses, hoping to assist in their adoptions. This is how I met Barney, an admirable Belgian gelding, who had been with the rescue for a little over a year.

Our first encounter was truly memorable for me. When I approached him in the field, where he reigned as herd leader, we immediately connected. It felt as if we knew each other. I was in awe of his impressive size and, at the same time, sensed the gentle spirit within. Capturing his essence on camera was effortless.

While he graciously opened up to me, I felt the awareness and energy of an old soul. Little did I know this was just the beginning of a lasting friendship.

"I was told that Barney's previous owners used him in competitive pulls, but he was really lacking the spark that was required," recalled Christine.

Not suited for an activity foreign to his temperament, Barney ended up living in a stall with no pasture, as his owners decided to rent their land to cash croppers instead. Eventually, Barney was shipped to auction.

Christine and Howie visit the auction



Photographer Manuela Stefan reuniting with Barney at his new home, Horse Discovery.

regularly, and so they did two years ago, one hot August day. With a soft spot for Belgians, Christine noticed Barney right away, but was taken aback by his poor condition. Despite this and the harsh auction environment, Christine watched Barney interacting with a group of children, enjoying the attention they were paying him. "When I first saw Barney at the auction, he was covered with kids! I did not have to think twice, I immediately knew that I would keep this big sweetie safe," she said.

She recalled the moment Barney arrived at the rescue and seemed to be overwhelmed by the access to so much grass, space, other horses and, most importantly, love. He was clearly not accustomed to any of it.

Christine had to work hard to help Barney put some weight on. "He was in such poor shape and had very little muscle tone," she said. Plus, with his body still stiff and sore from years of pulling and stall confinement, it took Barney some time to develop.

Over the course of Barney's rehabilitation, Christine felt as though she would never want to part with him. But, a year later, she said "I began to

realize that I really was not able to give him all of the attention he deserved. I was too busy tending to other rescue horses, plus my own."

So, she decided to seek a new home for Barney. "That is when Cheri came into our lives," she said. "I could not deny the feeling that they were perfect for each other and that this family would love my boy the way I did, plus some."

a new home

In November 2014, Barney was adopted by Cheri Davidson, owner of Horse Discovery near Millbrook, Ontario, a registered FEEL (Equine Facilitated Experiential Learning) practice. FEEL is a leading edge modality, which involves horses' willing participation as partners in assisting humans discover their potential and growth.

While researching rescues in her area, Cheri stumbled upon the portraits of horses available for adoption that I took at Freedom Valley, and Barney caught her eye. Something clicked inside her. "I met Barney on a very cold November day. I brought our two boys with me, ages two and six," she said. "After stepping inside the paddock, what struck me was that Barney never took his eyes off the boys. He bent down to sniff their hats and was so interested in them. I knew right away that he was meant to join our family."

The next part of his journey was not easy on Barney. He didn't transition well and had a hard time integrating into his new herd. His position was unclear: from herd leader, a role earned and maintained amongst his previous pasture mates, he found himself at the bottom of the



Barney has proven to have a soft spot for children, including Cheri Davidson's two young sons.



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pecking order. He was not connecting with his new owners and his health started to deteriorate. “During the weeks and months following Barney’s arrival at our farm, I was reminded of the complexity and depth of emotions horses experience, noted Cheri.

Worried, and wanting to support Barney’s healing, but not getting any results from traditional approaches, Cheri decided to try a new avenue – she brought in Janet Hogeboom, a certified Emotion Code practitioner (a holistic therapy to release “trapped” emotions). Through a series of energy healing sessions with Barney, Janet identified and helped him release negative emotions such as panic, confusion and abandonment, which, she said, he had been carrying in his body, affecting his connection to the world. “I noticed an immediate difference,” said Cheri. “Barney began to look me in the eye, the sadness lifted, he started to engage with me and enjoy being groomed. We finally connected and it felt amazing to receive his huge heart energy!”

a reunion

In May of this year, I went to visit Barney at his new home. I had not been around horses for a while and I was feeling uncertain in my life, at the time.

Barney was grazing with his buddies when I arrived. He noticed me from a distance and paused. He remained quiet and still, looking straight at me, waiting. As I approached, I spontaneously felt like sitting in the grass beside him. With him next to me, I felt his energy wrap around me and I felt safe and protected.

I looked up at his beautiful, expressive face and our eyes met. There was so much love and understanding in them and I almost heard him say “Oh, there you are again! Do not worry, I have your back.” We gazed into the distance together and I felt so in sync with him. My breathing slowed down. Nothing else mattered in that moment.

My spirit was uplifted and I felt deeply reassured. More so, I reconnected with a deep part within myself, which further allowed inspiration to come through in my work. One brief moment with Barney also made me realize how I am supposed to feel in my life in general – never fearful or doubtful – and that I am always supported and safe, no matter what.

Cheri recalled her observation of this moment. “I held my breath, [waiting to see if] Barney might choose to work with Manuela, as [to that point] he had been reluctant to approach visitors and to do any FEEL work. On that day, however, he stepped right up to her as if to say “I’m ready, I’m here for you.” The two of them sat in peace, in their own little world, for quite a long time. It was beautiful to see and brought tears to my eyes.”

As far as I am concerned, Barney is a healer – a wounded one, whose difficulties have only increased his sensitivity and compassion, making him even better suited for this beautiful purpose. Through his role at Horse Discovery, I know Barney will continue helping a lot of human hearts expand.

“Today, Barney is the leader of the herd and an active member of our FEEL team,” said Cheri. “He always volunteers to work with children and youth.”

Cheri’s two boys have a special connection with Barney. I have witnessed their interaction, and Barney’s eyes soften and almost smile each time they are together. Their pure spirits see each other. 🐾