The Second Chances Farm at the Lowell Correctional Institute near Ocala held their first-ever open house on March 8. The event was sponsored by the Florida Thoroughbred Breeders’ & Owners’ Association, Florida Department of Corrections, Florida Thoroughbred Charities and the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation.

Inmate Evelyn Spillman who has been in the program assigned to millionaire stakes winner Shake You Down. She shared her experience of going to prison at age 16 and how much she has changed in the last 5 years thanks to working with the horses and the feeling of having purpose because she knows her horse counts on her daily.

“The open house was an opportunity for the community, not just people who participate in the equestrian realm, the chance to come view the hard work and effort the program participants put into the horses and the stables.” Misty Cash, Department of Corrections communication director said. “They work hard and the open house

By TAMMY A. GANTT AND CHARLOTTE BRUNSON
Chance
as a great opportunity for residents of Marion County and beyond to see the girls work, how beautiful the horses are and how well the facilities are maintained. We hope the community feels welcome to visit the farm and ask us any questions they may have about the program and how they can become involved.”

Activities included demonstrations with adoptable horses, tours of the 100 acre farm, visits with inmates and the horses to which they are assigned, and a luncheon provided by the vocational culinary program of the correctional institute. Speakers included the Annual Fund Director for the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation Lisa Craig, long-time program advocate and warden Gustavo Mazorra and Kim Southerland, region 2 director for Florida’s Department of Corrections. Also, speaking were current program student Evelyn Spillman and program graduates Dawn Driggers, Shannon Reiger and Erika Martin.

Craig - who scheduled the event along with FTBOA’s Retired Thoroughbred Committee - hoped to bring awareness of the farm’s success, the ongoing challenge of placing horses and need for continued funding.
None realized the emotional impact the event would have on participants and program students long after the event was over. Part of that was due to touching moments that program students shared. Evelyn Spillman shared her experience with retiree Shake You Down. Before she met the horse, she had felt she had no purpose and wondered why she should even get up each day. After being with the horse a short time, Spillman realized there was someone who looked forward to seeing her every day and needed her. This alone gave her purpose. Upon her graduation this Fall, she will be working on a horse farm and she credits the program for it.

The now decade-old program was the first of its kind in the country to pair female inmates with retired racehorses. The program was implemented to teach offenders of non-violent crimes vocational training and life skills while working with retired racehorses. During the program, female inmates are responsible for the grooming, feeding, vet care and therapy for each of the 42 horses that currently reside there. Ideally, the inmates work with the horses until the horses are able to be adopted into new homes and begin new careers. While working with the horses, learning horse care and growing a passion to nurture, the female inmates can graduate with an Equine Care Technology certification.

The successful completion of the year-long program includes around 20 written tests, overseen by John Evans, the Vocational Teacher. Evans is a lifelong horseman who keeps the entire program on track while teaching students as many skills as possible during their incarceration.

Evans says “It’s amazing to see the change come over the students as they go through the program. This is great rehabilitation. The students’ work ethics grow strong, and they learn all about horses and how to care for them.”

Upon release, former offenders have the option to apply their polished equine skills to find employment in the...
equine industry. To date, 80 women have completed the program with only two returning to prison. This success rate of keeping graduates out of prison is unparalleled.

Cash attributes the success to the connection the participants have with the horses. She said, “They spend six to eight hours a day, seven days a week feeding, grooming and maintaining the stables. They study college level course work in addition to all the physical work they do each day. Their participation is a true commitment on their part. With all of that hard work, the girls come out of the program and have the skills and the confidence to go into the equestrian world and compete for employment.”

While Florida DOC provides the land and labor at no cost and the FTBOA supports the farm’s horse care expenses and equipment through its charitable arm, The Florida Thoroughbred Charities, the biggest challenge is funding.

“The FTBOA believes the care and support of retired Thoroughbreds is a common sense responsibility shared by all who participate in the racing and breeding industry. What makes our particular program different at Lowell Correctional Institute is that it also cares for and heals people as well as horses. That is an awesome combination. The FTBOA and our charitable arm, the Florida Thoroughbred Charities (FTC), is proud of the role we play with this unique farm.” —Lonny T. Powell, CEO and Executive Vice President of FTBOA & FTC

The farm typically has a waiting list for incoming thoroughbreds. To join the list, the following apply:

- Must be a Florida-bred thoroughbred
- Recently raced at a Florida track
- Retired due to age or physical condition
- A donation is requested along with the horse when accepted

A few resources for horses that do not fit the criteria

- Visit the website http://www.unwantedhorsecoalition.org/ for their Own Responsibly booklet and placement resources (separate story this issue)
- Contact the FTBOA at 352-629-2160 or info@ftboa.com for suggestions

FTBOA CFO Caroline Davis (below left) shares her vision with Department of Corrections Communications Director Misty Cash.