

FEATURED TOP STORY

Louisa newcomers bring animal sanctuary

Leah Coffey, Reporter 11 hrs ago



Michele Padilla and Joey Travers traded the desert of California for the rolling hills of Central Virginia in July of 2020. This would have been an impressive feat at that time in its own right, but they took it one step further and added a farm's worth of rescued animals to the mix.



Michele Padilla, Terry Garber and Erica Evans pose with puppies currently under the care of Hooves and Paws Animal Rescue in Louisa County.

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“The organization bought this property in 2019,” Padilla said. “Joey quit his job at the tattoo shop, moved here, was here alone for eight months getting the property ready... in July of 2020, we packed up all the animals and moved. The animals are so much happier here; we’re happier. We went from about five acres to 60.”

The nonprofit organization is Hooves and Paws Animal Rescue, which Padilla and Travers started in 2002, and which has grown over the past two decades to include approximately 90 furry residents – currently home to dogs, rabbits, goats, sheep, pigs, alpacas, horses, donkeys, cattle and a zebu – a subspecies of cattle native to India.

“It definitely fluctuates with what’s going on, but as we continue to grow, as we have more support and more volunteers and more donations, we’re able to take in more animals,” Padilla said. “Hopefully we can keep expanding.”

Animals that have been surrendered, saved from auctions, cruelty cases, animal shelter, or require medical care are brought to Hooves and Paws where they receive the attention they need before – hopefully – getting adopted. For reasons not entirely known, there has been an uptick in animal surrenders that have created what Padilla describes as a crisis in the shelters.

“The hard thing is we definitely get more requests for help than we can take in,” Padilla said. “We always try to make sure we’re keeping animals at a manageable level; that we’re making sure we’re maintaining a good level of care for them and that we can afford to take care of them. We just try to help as many animals as we possibly can.”

While deciding where to move their animal sanctuary, Padilla and Travers considered several areas along the east coast. A band member in a

past life, Travers reflected on places those travels had taken him.

“Every time I came through Virginia, I always thought it was a state untapped,” Travers said. “It didn’t have these big, crazy cities; the rural land was there – mountains, rivers. We said let’s go take a shot at Virginia and when we flew in, we knew right away, just looking down, ‘Oh yeah, this is the place,’ and we never looked back.”

The couple kept their operation small for a while as they regained their footing in a totally new landscape, but then opened up to volunteers and a larger team about a year ago.

“The difference that we’ve learned coming here from California is that it’s not just caring for the animals, it’s caring for a farm,” Padilla said.

“Coming from the desert, we’ve had to learn everything about the different hay here, about the pastures, the different parasites for the animals – it’s just been a learning process for us and there’s an endless supply of work here.”

To help with all that work, the rescue consists of five paid staff members – which they would like to expand slightly as they grow – and as many volunteers as are willing.

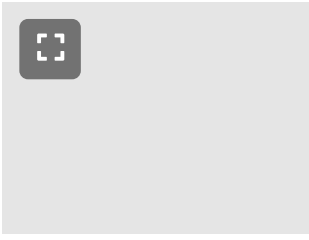
“We’ve probably got anywhere from 12 to 20 volunteers coming in every other week,” Travers said. “We try to work with everyone; anyone who wants to come out and see what we do. That’s been a huge help because we’re just stewards of the rescue – it’s really a team, a group of people that build these things. We welcome volunteers; we really need a constant influx of volunteers for a place this big.”

Terry Garber has volunteered with the rescue for a year, and he’s started bringing his wife along for the fun as well.

“I grew up on a farm and I liked farm animals; I just like the variety of them,” Garber said. “Since I retired, I have time to goof off, so this is one of the things I’m doing. It’s a lot of fun. We work fairly hard sometimes, but we have a lot of fun. I love the animals.”

Erica Evans is one of the team’s paid staff members, coming to the organization over a year ago from a background in vet medicine at a small animal clinic.

“I wanted to start working with large animals,” Evans said. “[With] small animals it’s the same thing every day; [with] large animals it’s something new every single day, and a lot more species to work with. My favorite part is seeing all the new animals come in. It’s really cool to see animals come from a bad situation and then you see they really start to express themselves.”



Padilla and Travers with a dog
at the rescue

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Once they're able to hire a few more paid staff, Travers and Padilla would like to focus more on community outreach in schools, among senior citizens, and in the area at large. They would like to help spay and neuter, help with community services, cover vet bills and the cost of food for those who can't afford it, and more. Eventually, they would like to expand and open more animal rescues in different states.

"The sky's the limit; we're not afraid to think big," Travers said. "There's a certain calmness or stillness when you're in the presence of animals; I think that's really important for people. We're always running around to the next thing... we want people interacting with the animals; we want them to see that these beings are incredible. They all have personalities. You can learn so much from being around animals."

For additional information or to contribute to the nonprofit organization, visit www.hoovesandpaws.org.