

# abused kids and wounded horses

How one couple worked together to fulfill a dream of caring for both

BY **BENJAMIN HAWKINS**

PHOTOS BY **REBECCA CAIN**



**KIM TSCHIRRET'S DREAM** to help hurting children grew from her own childhood pain and her love for a horse. Her father was an alcoholic, and he would often abuse his wife and children emotionally and verbally. But Kim found one safe place, one outlet for processing her confusion and hurt. She loved to spend time riding and grooming her American Saddlebred horse, Country.

"There was a bond and a connection that we had," she says. "The barn was my haven. It was the place where I didn't get yelled at, where my life wasn't turned upside down."

As God would have it, Kim's love for Country prompted her, in 2010, to begin Hope Reins, an equine therapy ranch that aims to help children who have suffered abuse and other forms of trauma and pain. During the past decade, the ranch has offered 30,000 individual therapy sessions, at no cost, to hurting children.

## 'I believe in you'

Years before, Kim moved to Chicago to start a business career. There she met and married her husband, Mike. As their family began to grow,



Mike and Kim Tschirret

Kim put her career aside to care for their two children.

In 2007, her church hosted a ladies' retreat, where one of the teachers asked a question that would transform Kim's life: "What is something that you used to love to do that you don't do anymore?"

Kim's mind went immediately to her childhood horse. Soon after the retreat, she enrolled in riding lessons. Mike supported her new passion and noticed how it refreshed her. But Kim felt there was something more that God wanted to do with her love for horses.

While looking for books on "Jesus and horses," she found *Hope Rising* by Kim Meeder. The book told the stories of abused horses and hurting children who helped one another find healing. During the week that followed, she read the book twice. One night as she read, Mike found Kim in tears. Kim says, "I knew right then that was what the Lord wanted me to do."

Eventually, Kim was able to share with Mike her vision to help hurting children be comforted by God's love

and compassion, a dream motivated by 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. But even as she described her dream, she began to wonder whether she could achieve it. After all, they didn't have money to start the ministry, or pay the childcare costs for their two kids.

"Mike," she asked, "is this crazy?" "Slow down and take a breath," he replied. "We obviously have a lot to figure out, but let's try to take it one step at a time for now, OK? You want this. You can do this. So we will figure it out. I believe in you."

### 'My encourager'

During the ministry's early years, Mike did everything he could to help Kim flourish in her calling. And though he has never discovered a personal connection with horses, he has always enjoyed visiting the ranch. He especially loved watching Kim groom Selah. A reddish-brown horse with a long white patch on her muzzle, Selah had survived the cruelty of her former owner. Selah was also a Saddlebred, just like Kim's childhood horse, Country.

"Mike was my No. 1 encourager," Kim says. "He also helped me a lot with the kids—picking them up from school, helping with dinner. . . . In those formative years of Hope Reins, I couldn't have done it without his support."

From the beginning, Hope Reins resided on a 20-acre plot, leased from a local church for only \$1 per month. But they had only pasture-land, an outdoor arena, a portable toilet and a 12-by-12-foot shed with one lightbulb to serve as a welcome center. Moreover, the waiting list of children wanting to come to Hope Reins exceeded the ranch's capacity. So in 2015, as the demand for ministry increased and the lease on their land was coming to a close, Kim felt they needed to relocate.

### A new home for Hope Reins

When the couple first stepped onto a 33-acre ranch outside Raleigh, North Carolina, Kim and Mike wondered why they had even bothered to visit. Granted, the property was beautiful, complete with a 4,000-square-foot log cabin and two ponds. But it was priced at \$4 million, and at that time, Hope Reins had only a \$300,000 annual budget.

Then as the price of the ranch came down, Hope Reins bid \$1 million for the property, requesting a six-month due diligence period for raising funds. To their surprise, the offer was accepted. Then, only two hours later, the U.S. Department of Agriculture offered Hope Reins a \$1 million, 40-year loan for purchasing the ranch. The loan is being paid off through the support of the ministry's generous donors. >>>



Twinkle and Avolina

### A horse named Twinkle

Having watched God bring comfort to children through the horses at Hope Reins for more than a decade, Mike and Kim stand in awe.

“We have seen kids’ lives completely transformed,” Kim says. “Kids themselves have said, ‘I wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for Hope Reins.’ It’s very humbling . . . to know what God is doing.”

For example, Kim recalls the connection between Twinkle, a brown micro miniature horse with a sandy mane and white spots, and Avolina, a young girl with curly black hair.

Both horse and girl had lived through horrors. By age 4, Avolina had faced starvation and physical abuse, and she watched helplessly as a family member beat and drowned her little brother in a bathtub. After being rescued and adopted by a police officer, Avolina came to Hope

Reins. There she met Twinkle, who’d been rescued out of a junkyard from starvation and ill treatment.

When Avolina saw Twinkle for the first time, the tiny horse still couldn’t walk. Sympathizing with Twinkle’s pain, Avolina sought to comfort her. As a result, Avolina slowly found healing for her own hurts.

Alongside days of sunshine and blessing, Kim and Mike have seen days of sadness and rain. On April 13, 2020, Twinkle passed away. But this tiny horse left a legacy of courage for the children who have known her.

“Even living in her pain, she had a purpose,” Kim says. “She showed people what it looks like, even though you’re hurting, to continue walking in hope.” ●

Benjamin Hawkins is a freelance writer and associate editor of *The Pathway*, the news journal of the Missouri Baptist Convention.



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Listen to a Focus on the Family broadcast where Kim Meeder shares how hurting kids have started to heal after being paired with abused horses.

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