

*"Herd" it Through the Grapevine: The Mission of
Wild Horse Advocate Ellie Phipps Price*

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NATALIE HAYS

WRITER'S COMMENT: As a political science major and aspiring investigative journalist, my ultimate goal is to bring awareness to unconventional issues and amplify underrepresented voices. When tasked with profiling an interesting individual for Dr. Greg Miller's UWP 104C (Journalism) course, I wanted to highlight someone working behind the scenes and fighting for social issues that aren't discussed nearly enough in the mainstream media. In my article, I spoke with fellow animal lover Ellie Phipps Price, a Northern California business owner who protects wild horses and burros from abuse at the hands of the federal government. Determined and exceptionally kind, Phipps Price is a powerful voice in grassroots advocacy. I highlight her talents as an accomplished winemaker and influential figure in the animal rights movement and explore the issues that wild horses of Western America face today.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In journalism a successful profile should unfold with a pleasing spontaneity that belies the artfulness of the article's construction. An author needs to tell a person's life story, and to arrange it around a compelling theme that draws together past and present while avoiding the dreary linearity of an encyclopedia article. By the time readers encounter any backstory—childhood, historical context, and so on—we should already be hooked. The person being profiled should come across with vivid singularity and yet also be relatable in one way or another: her interests become our interests, her passion becomes ours. As with a good cinematic experience, readers

appreciate a mixture of close-ups and long shots and an evocative location, a sense of having really been somewhere.

I believe you'll find all of this and more when you read Natalie Hays' riveting profile of Ellie Phipps Price. Note how she puts us there in Elk Creek from the start, breaking its ghost town silence with the "rumbling crescendos" of a mustang herd that turns out to have been rescued by the article's protagonist. An inspiring mixture of observation and research, Natalie's article moves seamlessly within Phipps Price's world and into larger societal issues. I especially admire Natalie's pacing and her presentation of dialogue. Even the outrageousness of the title's pun turns to be well-judged.

—Greg Miller, University Writing Program



A herd of wild mustangs at Montgomery Creek Ranch. (Source: Montgomery Creek Ranch)

At first glance, Elk Creek, California resembles a countryside ghost town. With a population of 200 people, the buildings are empty and the residents are scarce. But a few miles away,

the silence is drowned out by a thunderous noise coming from the rolling hills of the Central Valley. The rumbling crescendos as a crowd of cream, chestnut, gray, and dark-colored horses charge across a field.

Welcome to Ellie Phipps Price's backyard. "Not many people get to see anything like this," she tells me. "Not this many at once." She is referring to the hundreds of horses that gallop across her property. Since 2012, Phipps Price — an entrepreneur with a love for horses — has been rescuing wild horses and bringing them to safety at her Montgomery Creek Ranch just outside of Elk Creek. So far, the 2,000-acre property with a training and adoption program has saved over 1,000 wild mustangs from slaughter. Over 200 mustangs currently live on the ranch, along with a variety of rescued wild burros. "I know there's more I could be doing," she says. "When I started helping out, I said to myself, 'Okay, I'll just save this group.' Now, I hope we can make a difference for all horses."

Growing up, Phipps Price lived everywhere from California to Colorado to Connecticut, but always took her love of animals with her. "I was never very good at sports, and I was never a fast runner," she laughs. "So I became the kid that always wanted to be in a barn riding a horse." Phipps Price was introduced to horseback riding at age 7 on a visit to her grandfather's ranch. Soon after, she began riding lessons and begged her mother to take her on trail rides. By age 10, she was accompanying her grandfather on fox hunts and riding lesson-horses in local horse shows. As a teenager, however, Phipps Price shifted her priorities to focus on school and business endeavors. "I still loved horses, but I wanted to work, find a career that would let me eventually have a horse of my own," she says.

Phipps Price graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in English Literature and moved to San Francisco full-time to pursue a marketing career. After working in restaurant guides selling advertising, she developed an interest in the wine business. This eventually led her to take a summer program in enology and viticulture at UC Davis, where she learned about grape farming

and the art of making wine. At the same time, she rekindled her relationship with riding. “One day, I drove by a barn out in West Marin, stopped in to see what was going on, and then I was riding again and never looked back,” she recalls. A few months later, Phipps Price got her first-ever domestic horse, an off-the-track thoroughbred. In her late twenties, after riding other people’s horses for so long, this was the first time she could call one her own.

In 1998, Phipps Price bought her first business, Durell Vineyards in Sonoma County, where she grew grapes for various wineries. In 2009, she expanded the business, focusing on Chardonnay and Pinot Noir under her brand Dunstan Wines. She celebrated the accomplishment by adopting a wild mustang. “The wine story and horse story tie into each other,” she explains. “Dunstan is also the name of my first mustang.” Despite her excitement, Phipps Price discovered an ugly truth about mustang ownership — these animals are often bought for profit or sold for their meat. Abuse and exploitation are extremely common at rodeos and government auctions. “I remember going to a rodeo with my kids in Colorado,” she says grimly. “They used a wild mustang for a bucking horse competition. It panicked, impaled itself on a gate, and was bleeding out in its pen. No horse should be put in that situation.”

Phipps Price called the police and spoke to the local press about what she witnessed. “I was asking around and trying to understand how a wild horse got there in the first place,” she says. “When I see something like that happening, I want to do something about it.” What the animal lover had seen was a turning point in her career. She wanted to know if there was more she could do to protect the mustangs from harm and get them out of those situations. This led to her working with the American Wild Horse Campaign (AWHC).

Horses evolved on the North American continent and then crossed over to Europe and Asia before going extinct on this continent over 10,000 years ago (Bradford and Pester). American wild mustangs arrived on the West Coast as domesticated animals

that accompanied 16th-century Spanish explorers. The mustang population grows by 15% each year according to a study from National Geographic, and while 86,000 live on public land today, only 31,000 are “free-roaming” with no government intervention. The remaining 55,000 are kept in captivity by facilities funded by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and will often be sent to slaughterhouses or auctioned off to “kill buyers” for thousands of dollars (Daly). For the first time in history, there are more horses in government holding pens than there are in the wild.

Phipps Price says that while mustang populations need to be managed, there are humane alternatives to stabilizing the herds through fertility control and better management by the BLM. “It’s very expensive and inhumane for the U.S. government to round up wild horses, put them in holding pens, and then auction them off to buyers who are turning around and selling the horses to auction yards and kill pens,” she says. “What we have right now is a total waste of taxpayer money, and the horses are paying the price with their lives.”

Phipps Price attended her first auction in 2010 and found herself in a bidding war against kill buyers to rescue a group of horses. After bidding thousands of dollars, she ended up with all 172 mustangs up for bid. “They had five big semi-trucks ready to pick up 35 horses each and drive them up to Canada for slaughter,” she recalls. “At that point, I didn’t hesitate to save them all.” Since then, she has visited numerous auctions and BLM holding facilities trying to adopt as many wild horses as she can take care of.

In 2012, she bought the land that would become Montgomery Creek Ranch. She operates MCR as a nonprofit that raises awareness about mustangs and the failed government policies that have caused them to lose their place on western public lands. MCR also operates a training and adoption program for younger horses. “The purpose is to connect people with horses and show the value of these horses and how they’re beautiful and trainable,” she says. “They have their own families, relationships, best friends, and opinions about things just like we do as human beings.”

In addition to her nonprofit, Phipps Price produced the 2013 documentary, “American Mustang,” a 3-D film following a young girl who discovers that wild horses are in danger. She also serves as Board President of the American Wild Horse Campaign, which works at the national level to protect wild horses and their habitats. “I think it’s a combination of things that will get the word out. Any movie, any article, or professional photographs of the herds make a difference.”

Although kill buyers are active across many states, the most daunting challenge according to Phipps Price is “trying to change the status quo at the BLM”. Phipps Price says we need to reform the BLM’s broken wild horse program. “We’re tired of seeing the horses scapegoated,” she says. MCR and the AWHC strive for people to understand that it is not the horses that are the problem, but rather an unfair allocation of resources and bad government management.

When asked how the public can get involved, Phipps Price says strengthening grassroots advocacy, like what AWHC is doing, will help put forth legislation to stop the mistreatment of wild horses and fund effective fertility control. “83% of Americans believe horses should not go to slaughter,” she says. “Luckily, there is more awareness about it and the cruelty of it all.”

With a hopeful smile, Phipps Price leaves me with a closing statement on her current projects and her hope for saving the animal she adores so much. “With everything I do, I hope to energize the American people to take a stand on the wild horse issue and keep wild horses wild.”

More information on the mission of Ellie Phipps Price and her work advocating for wild horses can be found on montgomerycreekranch.org and americanwildhorsecampaign.org, as well as their social media pages (@mcrmustangs and @freewildhorses on Instagram).

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