

## THE SPIRIT OF THE MUSTANG

The wild American mustang—recognized nationally as a “living symbol of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West”—has persevered through persecution, starvation, abuse, neglect, natural disasters and predators. It is this resilience, the mustang’s spirit and beauty, and her father’s legacy that inspired Sue Anne Wells to establish Mustang Leadership Partners to help sustain and preserve the breed.

“The mustang is a part of our heritage and embodies the American spirit,” says Wells. “There is a majestic quality about mustangs that is hard to put into words ... they are survivors and can teach us all important life lessons.”

For Wells, these lessons have been threaded throughout her life since she began adopting mustangs in 2002, soon after her father passed away. He had adopted his first mustang, Chief, in 1999 and quickly added two more to the family farm.

“I wanted to continue my dad’s legacy, but I had no idea mustangs would become such a huge part of my life,” says Wells, who has adopted close to 30 mustangs and has placed 15 of them on other farms. “Mustangs have become my own personal inspiration to encourage and motivate others to persevere despite all odds of survival or success working against them.”

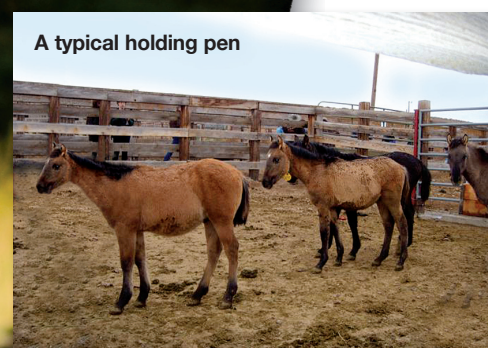
Once allowed to roam free, the wild American mustang today is managed through a complex population management and adoption program, which is the result of decades of legislation that began with the passing of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act. This Act was passed by Congress to protect and sustain free-roaming horses and burros and it prohibited the hunting and killing of wild horses on public land. The wild mustang population—down to an estimated 17,000 at the time—began to rise.



Sue Anne Wells jogs alongside one of the mustangs born on her farm.



Once adopted, the horses, looking healthy and fit, may be trained for many disciplines.



A typical holding pen

launched a campaign to broaden awareness about its mustang adoption program. With an estimated 33,000 wild mustangs roaming across ten western states—and another 47,000 being cared for in short-term corrals or long-term pastures managed by the BLM—adoptions are critical for protecting and improving conditions for mustangs.

“Most people do not realize the plight of the mustang,” says Mark Davis, acting CEO of the American Mustang and Burro Association. “Programs like Mustang Leadership Partners are extremely important because they show that formerly wild horses can be gentled and trained, contrary to the public notion that mustangs are ‘the untouchables.’ As a result, more mustangs will be placed in caring homes.”

Realizing the powerful leadership lessons that mustangs can provide, Wells decided to launch an equestrian program in February 2009 in partnership with the Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy (CGLA), Tennessee’s first all-girls public charter school, which she helped co-found in 2008. CGLA serves grades 6-12 and has a curriculum focused on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Meeting two hours each week throughout the CGLA school year, the MLP program exposes girls to a variety of hands-on experiences grounded in science, life skills, and leadership development. All three components are closely intertwined within core lessons as girls are challenged to make connections between their work with mustangs and their own lives.

“Most of our students had never been around horses prior to enrolling in the Mustang Leadership Partners program,” says Wells. “The students have gained confidence and are not at all intimidated by a wild horse. Consequently, they are not easily intimidated by a challenging math or science class.”

The program serves 16 girls divided into beginner and intermediate groups, who are selected through a competitive application process at the beginning of each school year. Girls must be committed to established standards of horsemanship, leadership, and teamwork, as well as maintain a strong academic standing at CGLA.

“The rider must be an effective leader, have

complete control of her feelings, and remain calm in order to gain the respect of the mustang,” says Wells.

One student, April, was so fearful of horses when she first started the program that she could not even stand next to a horse’s stall. But one year later there is no other place she’d rather be than the farm.

“Now I have fallen in love with the horses, and it feels good to conquer my fear,” says April. “You have to be able to communicate for the horses to trust you. You have to be a leader.”

In addition to its adoption and equestrian programs, Mustang Leadership Partners trains mustangs using classical dressage and natural horsemanship techniques. With the help of several renowned trainers—and the dedication of staff and competitive riders—many of the mustangs have competed and placed in dressage competitions across the country.

“By competing in national competitions with our mustangs, we hope to showcase the beauty, agility, and talent of this amazing breed,” says Wells, who competes regularly in dressage events.

Advocacy and education efforts continue and have even extended to the “big screen” through two PBS documentaries that featured Mustang Leadership Partners’ mustangs. “Untamed Legacy: America’s Wild Mustang” was produced locally by WTCI-PBS and won three Midsouth Regional Emmy Awards in 2012 in the documentary, writing, and photography categories. Focusing on the wild mustang’s survival and struggles as resources diminish, Untamed Legacy chronicles a mustang named Charlie on his journey from the wild to his new home in Alabama, and all the people whose lives he touches along the way—including students from CGLA. When producers from American Experience were in the Tennessee Valley shooting scenes for Episode 3 of “We Shall Remain: Trail of Tears”, several mustangs from Mustang Leadership Partners were used to create horseback riding scenes realistic to the time period.

For Wells, it is her time on the farm, working one-on-one with her mustangs and CGLA students that is most rewarding—and this journey is one she is certain will continue to teach her new life lessons.

“We are committed to continuing to adopt and care for mustangs, whose gentleness, fortitude, and spirit touch the lives of our staff and students every day.” —Jennifer Watts Hoff

Visit [www.mustangleadershippartners.com](http://www.mustangleadershippartners.com) to learn more about the program.