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Microchip IDs can be real horse-saver

Katrina turns one couple into believers

By **CHRISTY WHITEHEAD**, *River City News* correspondent

In the weeks that followed Hurricane Katrina, several hundred animals, including horses, found themselves homeless and waiting for their owners to come back and get them.

Keystone Heights couple Chris and Dale Dunn helped out in Louisiana, and when they came home they wanted to do something locally.

Chris Dunn, president of North Florida Horse Rescue, asked veterinarian John Wade of AVID (American Veterinary Identification Device) Equine to come to the Jacksonville Equestrian Center on the Westside recently and help do micro-chipping "at cost" for horse owners.

The couple helped take care of 364 lost horses in Louisiana, the majority of which were micro-chipped, a process in which a vet injects a tiny microchip into the animal's neck area.

The microchip is assigned a number, and the number, along with identification information, is given to HORSEtrac, a 24-hour disaster and recovery network for horses.

Dunn said she worried about a hurricane hitting Northeast Florida and the possibility that many horses here would not be returned to their owners. The device is also good for horses that have been lost or stolen, she said.

People from all over Northeast Florida lined up early to take advantage of the deal of \$20 per horse. Dunn said the service normally costs \$50 to \$100 with an additional fee to have the information put in the database.

Wade said horse owners usually have their animals tested for diseases using what's called the Coggins test. But in Louisiana, to get the Coggins test, horses have to have some sort of permanent marking. He said most owners choose micro-chipping, which can't be erased and is guaranteed for life. However, in Florida, a permanent identification is not required.



Ashley Durand, 11, brought a horse she rents to the Jacksonville Equestrian Center to be microchipped. Veterinarian Alan Weldon of Jacksonville Equine in Riverside scans the horse to make sure it doesn't already have a microchip.



Wanda Wiggins of Mandarin calms her horse Dulcinea while veterinarian Alan Weldon pulls the cap off of a needle to inject a microchip into the horse's neck. The microchip can be a live-saver if the horse is lost or stolen.
CHRISTY WHITEHEADSpecial

Wanda and Dennis Wiggins brought in their two Danish Warmbloods from Mandarin to be micro-chipped. Wanda Wiggins said they have an African Grey who is also micro-chipped. She said she has been wanting to get the horses done for years.

"Our vets haven't really promoted it," she said. "After Katrina, we realized the necessity of it. Those of us that love our horses will do just about anything for them."

Chris Dunn said they gave out about 200 microchips at the equestrian center.



Dusine, a 19-year-old Danish Warmblood, eats a mint.
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Dunn said she was very pleased with the turnout, but that she still has a hard time dealing with some of the heartbreak she saw in Louisiana.

"The first and foremost thing we saw was the look of fear and trauma in the horses' eyes," Dunn said. "They were hurt, tired, hungry."

She said they saw many injuries from severe lacerations to the chest, hip, shoulder and many leg and feet punctures. Another big problem she said was that some of them were in contaminated water and were having skin problems--sometimes skin and hair coming off.

They worked in the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales, La. Along with horses, the center also had approximately 5,000 cats and dogs, she said.

"Our days were long and hard; we started at 6:30 a.m. and it was 9 p.m. before we quit for the day," Dunn said. "You were too tired to eat and too tired to sleep."

She and her husband had intended to help out for two or three weeks, but after one week they had to come home.

"We would have stayed longer but Dale was carted off by ambulance and diagnosed with exhaustion and the doctor said 'go home,'" Dunn said. "This disaster proved to us that micro-chipping should be required by all states."

In Louisiana, by the second week of January, all but one of the 364 horses had been reunited with its owner, said Wade, largely due to the micro-chipping.