

Beaten sheep healing at Maple Farm

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By Mark Fisette

Cheri Ezell-VanderSluis of the Maple Farm Sanctuary in Mendon feeds the sheep she saved, Tara Anna, on Saturday.

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By Joyce Kelly/Daily News staff

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MENDON -

Less than three years ago, Milford Police rescued a lamb from a living hell after her owner admitted hog-tying, dragging and beating her and using her "as a pinata."

"They beat her with sticks or a baseball bat and told police they were going to stab her to death," said Cheri Ezell-Vandersluis, who now cares for the sheep with her husband, Jim Vandersluis at the Maple Farm Sanctuary on North Avenue.

"I don't care what country you come from - an animal has rights too, and this was extreme inhumane treatment," she said, referring to a "clash of cultures" argument made by the defense attorney for former owners Maria Pizha-Tacuri, 39, and Rosa Pizha, 20, of 2 Cemetery St., Milford, who were charged with animal cruelty. The animals' former owners are Ecuadorean.

Police found a permanent home for the lamb, now a sheep, with the Vandersluises, who subsequently named her Tara Anna.

"They felt she had been through so much, that she certainly deserved to live a life. Since we don't eat meat and don't farm anymore - I'm a vegan and my husband's a vegetarian - this is a good place for her to live out her life," Ezell-Vandersluis said at yesterday's orientation for farm volunteers.

Today, Tara Anna has a little slice of heaven carved out at the sanctuary.

She spends her days "hanging out" with other sheep, llamas and goats, Ezell-Vandersluis said.

"Or they walk around and eat hay or nibble at the grass. They just hang out - that's all they do. They have a very relaxed life, more relaxed than we do," she said, laughing.

Tara Anna has healed considerably since arriving at the sanctuary, said Jim Vandersluis.

When she joined the sanctuary in the summer of 2005, veterinarian visits and shearings traumatized her, he said. She wouldn't take treats, and at feeding time, she just moved from one end of her pen to the other, he said.

"She takes treats away from our hands now," he said.

Tara Anna enjoys the companionship of Beau, a male neutered sheep, and Little Bit, another lamb rescued in February from a Marlborough location.

"(Little Bit) looked like a little white raisin when we took her in. They were going to leave her to die," because she was weak, said Ezell-Vandersluis. "Now she's doing beautifully," she said.

The sheep also hang out with Sam and Chloe, the goats, Ezell-Vandersluis said.

"All you have to do is look in their eyes and you know (they have feelings), souls," she said, patting Chloe and stroking her ears. "They're pretty special, that's for sure."

The Vandersluises take care of about 85 animals - cows, llamas, sheep, goats, ducks, chickens, pigs, and a few horses and dogs - at the Maple Farm Sanctuary, a nonprofit organization devoted to providing lifelong homes for abused, abandoned and unwanted farm animals.

"They live the remainder of their lives in peace, free to roam and meander the land at the Maple Farm Sanctuary," said Anne Mazar, chairwoman of the Mendon Land Use Committee.

The couple depends on volunteers and donations to run the sanctuary, which costs a minimum of \$5,000 a month to run, Ezell-Vandersluis said.

Yesterday, about 35 people attended the Maple Farm Sanctuary volunteer orientation day, she said.

Tara Anna and her friends at the farm enjoyed their visitors, treats, and extra-clean pens yesterday, Ezell-Vandersluis said.

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