



Donkey Rescue

Calling a player a donkey, especially when shouted by UK football fans, is a term of derision. He's clumsy, dim-witted—laughably so. But, in fact, donkeys are smart, sure-footed, and quick to anticipate their next move. Anyone who's watched an Amish donkey-basketball game knows that.

One of my teenage friends in Northern Wisconsin lived on a few acres of land along Spooner Lake. The draw for most of her school mates was the lake. Not for me. I loved hanging out with her burros. In fact, Jeannie and I bonded over burros and I was top on her list for overnights.

I learned only recently that there is no difference between a burro and a donkey—burro, the Spanish name. A young donkey is a burrito.

Jesus was hailed in Jerusalem, not riding on a white stallion, rather on a burro accompanied by a burrito, and that prophesied by Zechariah: "See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Donkeys are great pack animals, and unlike horses they don't startle easily. Farmers in the West often intermingle them with their flocks to ward off coyotes. But with all their favorable qualities, donkeys these days are in danger, their hides used in Asian countries for medicinal purposes.

Enter Ron King, a top publishing executive who would leave the corporate world to purchase a 75-acre California ranch. Now Oscar's Place, the ranch is a donkey refuge and adoption agency. Gone is his high salary, designer clothes, first-class world travel and fine dining.

Ron's extraordinary success in the corporate world could not have been imagined during his younger years. Born and raised in small-town Arkansas, his father was a Baptist preacher whose authoritarian God would have cast the

boy into hell. Ron's secret: his sexuality. He enrolled in college, but he couldn't get away from God's awful judgment. "For years," he writes, "I was in a really bad place... a drug addict... homeless when I was 26."

Yet he would pull himself together and find work. A waiter at Hard Rock Café, he encountered "a crotchety old waitress named Mary Ann." She was on to him almost immediately and saw in him what few other people had. She vowed to help him turn his life around. His response was *bug out old woman*—until he was so low he attempted suicide.

Mary Ann found out and pushed her way right through all of his

defenses. She shared her tip money and took him to AA. After the first meeting she told him she would be back the next morning. Another meeting. It was a difficult road, but he prevailed: "I have never had another drink or drug."

Back waiting tables, he was noticed by an advertising agent who recognized his affable personality. The agent took a chance and offered him a job in sales. "He taught me almost everything I know about business," remembers Ron. "From there, I was off and running."

And he's still running. Oscar's Place is the most difficult job he's ever had: "It is physically exhausting. I'm throwing bales of hay and carrying 50-pound bags of concrete, and chasing after animals who kick and bite when you're trying to give them injections."

Does he ever miss the perks of corporate life? Perhaps when he's administering injections, but he sums up his life succinctly: "I've never been happier."

Considering all the mentoring Ron has given and received throughout his career, one situation stands out above all others—tough love and tender mercies from Mary Ann, the "crotchety old waitress." □

—Ruth Tucker

...one situation stands out above all others—tough love and tender mercies from Mary Ann, the "crotchety old waitress."