

The Ameriprise Financial

# LifeDreams

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## Healing Horses

Having a plan, and the courage to pursue it, helped one small-business owner realize her life's dream of establishing a sanctuary for injured performance horses—a journey that proved to be more rewarding than she could ever imagine.

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## Believing in a Dream

► From the time she was a small child, Alexis Ells remembers rescuing injured animals and bringing them home for care. By continuing to listen to her innate passion for healing, Ells created her life's work, and today is the founding director of The Equine Sanctuary, a nonprofit organization that rescues, rehabilitates, and retrains injured performance horses that can no longer professionally compete. Located in Ojai, California, the sanctuary accommodates horses that usually require extensive veterinary care and are at high risk of being euthanized. Through her work, she, along with the help of a team of dedicated volunteers, has improved—and often saved—the lives of hundreds of horses. Most horses are rehabilitated, then adopted by families, leading to long productive lives. Those that require ongoing care remain as goodwill ambassadors in the sanctuary's educational and therapeutic programs for children and adults.

Although she is greatly admired for her work, the world wasn't quite ready for Ells's vision two decades ago. "When I first moved from New York to California and said I do structural integration, acupuncture, homeopathy, and nutrition for animals, people just looked at me and said, 'What planet did you drop in from? You will never be a success. No one is going to ever be interested in that,'" says Ells. Today her clients come from all over the world.

Ells is able to fund The Equine Sanctuary through donations, grants, events, memberships, and in-kind contributions. All of the sanctuary's horses benefit from the products donated by Ells's business, TerraOceana.com, a company that formulates and manufactures whole food organic supplements and homeopathics for people, dogs, cats, and horses. Her career has unfolded through a seemingly natural

**"I've just said yes to my gift, yes to my passions, yes to creating a plan that would fulfill my life's dream."**

process. "I was one of those blessed people who always knew what I wanted to do." Although her life's mission has been clear, the road hasn't always been easy. Ells had a car accident in 1988 and suffered a serious brain injury, losing many of her most basic abilities. Despite a grim prognosis, Ells proved her doctors wrong, and after four years of grueling rehabilitation, prevailed. And while the accident ended her competitive riding career, she is no longer in a wheelchair, can speak, read, write, run the sanctuary, run her company—and ride and train horses. Ells says the accident and its aftermath have given her tremendous freedom. Every day now is an opportunity to live with greater awareness and renewed purpose.

## Passion for the Plan

► Ells believes her success stems from her attitude that being challenged in life is inevitable....being defeated is optional. For inspiration she often thinks about the trials and tribulations of history's most successful figures. She looks to Thomas Edison who tried thousands of experiments before he invented the lightbulb. "Edison once said, 'When you exhaust all possibilities, remember this: you haven't.' I think it's about perception and perspective." She believes there are no mistakes, only opportunities for redirection. "If you give yourself the freedom to know that anything is possible, and you keep having faith, belief, and perseverance despite the odds, you will eventually arrive at the top of the mountain." she says.



## On the Right Track

► Bettering the lives of horses and people is what drives Ells day after day. "My life is fulfilling because I know that I impact, alter, and transform thousands of animals's and people's lives in the course of my journey here." So what is it about horses that fuels Ells's indomitable spirit? With great feeling, Ells offers this: "Horses are so magnificent, so bold, so courageous ...and like humans, so fragile in many ways. They are the true emissaries of unconditional love. They have contributed so much to humanity, carried countries to war without judgment, helped us build civilizations, been a means of transportation, and have enabled us to hunt for food. Yet they also give humans the extraordinary ability to fly over the earth at 35 miles per hour with an exhilarating sense of freedom."

As a woman who does her best to live in the present moment, Ells believes in working toward a goal. "It's important to set a course and to measure one's progress. Ells and her volunteers actively work to raise funds for the sanctuary. "We are determined to expand our educational and therapeutic programs and improve our facility so we can help more horses." In a final thought, Ells, ever the optimist, reveals her compassion and connection to these horses. Her ongoing commitment is to teach our youth that although hardships may befall us, we can choose to turn our tragedies into triumphs. That all sentient creatures have value...and that life is not disposable. Ells quotes Tom Smith, Seabiscuit's trainer, who once said, "You don't throw away a whole life just because it's a little banged up."



**Go online to follow Alexis Ells's story** and see these beautiful horses at [nationalgeographic.com/LifeDreams](http://nationalgeographic.com/LifeDreams)