

# THE SPIRIT of DOWN HOME RANCH

DECEMBER 2008

VOL. 18 No. 2

## OPERATION INDEPENDENCE

### *A New Challenge for our Community*

We are rolling up our sleeves once again, and launching a new and exciting venture — Operation Independence. For many years we have worked to buy land, pay it off, build on it, start programs and grow our population of residents and staff to a comfortable level. After 18 years we can claim a measure of success: a community of 21 Ranchers and 23 staff. We've built 24 homes, roads, a barn, the learning and garden centers, the fitness complex, camping and retreat facilities, and eleven greenhouses on 330 acres of woods and pastures.

Now, having built and populated the Down Home Ranch of our dreams, what do we find? We love it! It's terrific waking up each day living in the community of our dreams.

But the price of success is high. For example, in 2008 we'll have paid over \$60,000 for electricity alone. Gas and transportation costs are challenging us to conserve and drive less. We are totally dependent for all of our energy and food needs, and disasters like Hurricanes Katrina and Ike have shown us that we, like everybody else, must prepare for emergencies.

So, we've created a new strategic project, Operation Independence, designed to examine every aspect of our lives on the Ranch, with the goal of consuming less, and producing more. We are evaluating programs that will allow us to grow our own food year-round in a greenhouse dedicated to that purpose, raise our own beef, pork, eggs and other foodstuffs, and increase our level of preparedness for emergencies like hurricanes or ice storms. We are looking at ways to generate our own energy using solar and wind technology. We are investigating irrigation systems that use pond and well water to make Down Home Ranch a beautiful oasis, even in drought conditions like the one we are in now. Together, these programs will help us become more independent, and our residents and staff will be major players in our quest, contributing their time, talents and labor to these efforts.

The Still Water Foundation has awarded \$50,000 towards Operation Independence, but we have to raise \$150,000 before the grant money will be released. *Mother Earth News* is providing logistical and contact support, and has indicated interest in a future feature article about the Ranch's efforts and successes with Operation Independence. With these and other partners, we hope to become a model self-reliant community.

What began as a dream of two concerned parents in 1989 has become the working farm and ranch we envisioned. This new program will allow that dream to live for years to come.



# SPECIAL OLYMPICS AT DHR

It's taken a few years to get here, but Down Home Ranch is now developing a Special Olympics program, which our Ranchers really enjoy.

We just finished our competitions in golf, which turned out to be pretty enticing for some of our residents, most of whom have never played before. Next year we'll be in statewide competition and are even setting up our own driving and putting areas.

In addition to cleaning stalls and helping feed and water the horses, some of our residents are practicing for their first Special Olympics equestrian competition. They'll compete in several events, including relays, barrels, pole bending and halter classes. It takes a lot of skill and self-confidence to direct and control a horse, and our residents are doin' us proud. John, Crystal, Michael, Natalie, Rebecca are currently under saddle. Kelly, Sterling and Chris will be up soon. Our Special Olympics program is growing in conjunction with our NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped) certification due next year.

There's only one fly in the ointment — we don't have a trailer to get our horses to the equestrian games. We intend to prepare by attending local riding group Play Days and equine activities off of the ranch, our goal being a well rounded team of riders. We've begun a drive to raise the money needed for a rig (truck and trailer). Our trailer needs to handle 6 horses and all the gear. We hope to be pulling it with a new twin cab truck with funds donated to the Capstone Campaign. Check out this web site if you'd like to help: <http://www.firstgiving.com/dhr>. From here you can join a team, create your own or donate directly to helping the DHR Wranglers compete both in Special Olympics and local equestrian events. (Of course, a good, used, donated trailer would be welcome also.)



*Don working with Ranchers on their equestrian skills.*



*Sterling and Kelly take a breather at Special Olympics.*



*Terry is thrilled as she celebrates a successful putt. Tiger Woods couldn't have done it better.*



*Executives taking the afternoon off? Nope, it's Sterling, Michael and Mark at Forest Creek Golf Club.*

## CAMP 2008 OVER THE TOP

When we decided to hold our first summer camp, there were five of us meeting in the old trailer donated by the Rinderknecht family. It was 1995 and we were having a Board meeting when Fr. Sheldon said in his squeaky, high-pitched voice, "We've just got to get a program going." We didn't have any money and there were no buildings on the ranch, so Judy and Jerry decided to do the same thing that folks in Central Texas had been doing for generations — camp in the great outdoors.

So, with tents and cots loaned by the Texas National Guard, we launched the first Ranch Camp. Pat Geary brought 13 campers up from Houston for a week that almost did everybody in, but

changed our lives.

We took the campers to a public pool, and went fishing at a nearby pond. We had a few animals, and figured out how to do a couple of craft projects. Basically, we just made it up as we went along.

This year Ranch Camp celebrated its 14th year by hosting over 350 campers. They came from all over Texas and — following the national publicity from People magazine and CBS News in 2007 — we had campers from 15 other states and even one from Finland. Our activities covered everything from working with the horses to archery and kayaking.

Ranch Camp will continue to grow. We are working on offering some specialty camps and retreats for the whole family, including a Dude Ranch camp and a Trail Ride camp. Every year our program offers more opportunities for people with and without disabilities to experience a little bit of life on a working farm and ranch. We hope you'll join us!



*Ranch Camp is unlike any other. Here campers lead two of DHR's miniature donkeys in the round ring.*

# SWIM FEST LEADS TO COZUMEL

Labor Day was hot and sunny, a great day to be in the pool swimming for cash — the cash Down Home Ranchers needed to take their annual vacation. Each year there's a friendly competition between our five houses: Gabriel, Martha, Barnabas, Teresa and Joseph. The men of Barnabas House took the 2008 Swim Fest trophy, but everybody benefits from the event, which raised over \$20,000.

The Ranchers held a vote at their Village Council meeting to decide what their reward for raising the money would be, and the decision was unanimous — “we want to go on a cruise.” So, a cruise it was, for the third year in a row. Food, beaches, dancing, entertainment and all your best buds — what more could you want? The gang sailed out of Houston (Galveston was not yet back in service after Hurrigan Ike). Our crew consisted of 21 DHR Ranchers and eight staff plus friends and parents.

The gang set sail on the *Carnival Ecstasy*. They had a little sea-sickness to deal with the first day, but then came days of swimming, karaoke, shore excursions, dances and food, food and more food. They had a well-deserved blast and nobody wanted it to be over, but we promised that next year will be as good or better. Thank you to all who helped make the Swim Fest a success and the cruise a great time!



*Kelly, Sterling, Terry and Peter danced in the plaza to the music of a mariachi band.*



*Brent, Casey and Julia about to board the cruise ship Ecstasy.*



*Brent found a new favorite hat at an outdoor market.*



*Natalie and Michael on the dock during the 2008 cruise.*



*Residents swam a mile to raise the money for their annual vacation.*

## WORKING & PLAYING



# INDEPENDENCE

When we bought the Post Oak Island log cabin earlier this year, it got me thinking about how people once lived off the land. There was no HEB a few miles up the road, and either you produced what you needed or you went without. But here we are on 330 acres, and we're pretty much totally dependent on others for our food.

I also noticed (as we all have) that the prices for energy were going through the roof. The gas we need to get around is costing

much more than even a year ago, and we'll be spending more than \$60,000 for our electricity this year. Yikes! But we are, again, totally dependent on others for our energy.

During hurricane season we hosted a number of evacuees, which prompted us to start thinking about emergency generators and the other things we need to be prepared in a time of crisis. What happens when a hurricane or ice storm shuts off our power or closes the grocery store?

These issues are the impetus behind Operation Independence — a comprehensive, strategic plan to address the long term needs of our Ranch community. We've already begun the process. We're looking at ways to reduce our consumption of energy and water. We've begun to grow some of our own food, and we plan to grow a lot more. We're going to add chickens, cattle, sheep and goats to the roster of animals we care for on the Ranch. We want to produce some of our energy through solar, wind and other sources. The manure for our animals will become compost which will be used to grow our food and improve our pastures.

We're not naive — we'll still have to buy energy and food. But, we think we can reduce our costs, increase our productivity and sustainability, and perhaps become a model community in the process. Those independent folks from our past have a lot to teach us.



from the  
**DIRECTOR'S  
CHAIR**

# DOWN HOME RANCH ONLINE

## YOU'VE GOT MAIL!

In our November Annual Appeal, we asked everyone in our database to provide us with their email addresses. As our world has moved online, we have all benefited from the ability to communicate quickly easily with email. For organizations like DHR, the ability to use email means that we can reach out to our friends without spending thousands of dollars on printing and mailing.

We are already sending out email updates to folks who've signed up. When we have news to share, or new events are taking place, we'd like the ability to share

them with you. If you like, you can also get our newsletters (like this one) delivered to your email address. The PDF versions of our newsletters will include lots of options that aren't possible with printed ones, like links to web sites and other options for getting involved.

Please, if you haven't already done so, send us your email addresses and let us know if you'd like to hear from Down Home Ranch electronically. Go to our web site and click on the "Sign up for our email list" link that appears at the top of every page.

The screenshot shows the Down Home Ranch website. At the top right, it says "Contact Us by [Email](#) or Call 888.926.2253" with links for "Click for [Directions](#) or a [Map](#)" and "Sign-up for our Email List". A navigation menu includes "NEWS & EVENTS", "PROGRAMS", "ENTERPRISE", "DONATE", "VOLUNTEER", "RESOURCES", and "OUR STORY". The main content area features three promotional boxes: "TAKE A BREAK... RESPITE CAMPS THROUGH FEBRUARY" with a photo of a horse; "JOIN THE IOK! (YOU WON'T NEED THESE.)" with a photo of sneakers; and "EASTER LILIES" with a photo of a lily. A large "WELCOME!" banner with a group photo is at the bottom. Contact information for 20250 FM 619 • Elgin, TX 78621 is provided, along with email and phone numbers. A copyright notice for 2001-2008 and a "Terms of Use" link are also visible.

## NEW WEB SITE ON THE WAY

We're getting close to launching our new and improved web site, thanks to the work of Maria Larcher and Kyle Kirk, and the impetus of Board President Genie Sorensen.

The new site is long awaited and will be much more aesthetically pleasing, in addition to providing new online services and capabilities. Updates will be much more frequent, and the most commonly used pages will take the form of large buttons on the front page that will change regularly throughout the year as new events and opportunities arise. New interactive photo boxes will contain all the latest pictures of life

at the Ranch, and there are dozens of links to news and information, including links to all of the most recent research into Down Syndrome and programs for people with cognitive disabilities. There will be more about the history and life of Down Home Ranch, plus current and back issues of *The Spirit* and *Reflections* newsletters.

Our new site will launch without some of the bells and whistles we plan to include over time, but it will be a huge improvement over our current site. Check out [www.DownHomeRanch.org](#) and find out what we've been up to.

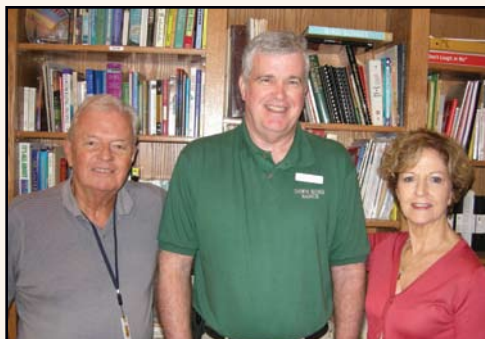
# RANCH LIFE

## RESIDENCY PROGRAM FULL

For ten years we worked hard to pay off the debt on the land, raise money and build buildings — especially homes — so we could start the residency program. Finally, in 2002, Judy, Jerry and Kelly welcomed Michael, Daniel and Robert into Gabriel House and life in the Village began.

Now, six years later, we just welcomed Kristen and Crystal into Martha House, putting us at 20 residents!

It is so great to come home at night or get up early in the morning and see lights



*Robert Shaw, center, completed three years of service on the DHR Board of Directors. Here he is with Jerry and Board President Genie Sorensen. Many thanks to Robert for his work on behalf of people with special needs.*



### 2009 ROUNDUP DATES

We'll hold our annual Weekend Roundup next year on Friday, April 17th for the Golf Tournament and Saturday, April 18th for the Gala — which this year will be held at Down Home Ranch. Preparations are already under way, so save the dates.



*Mike doing his favorite thing — driving the golf cart in front of his home, Gabriel House.*

on in houses and cabins, with lots of people stirring. And in the afternoons when Rebekah is doing her evening constitutional or Jennifer and Don are saddling up the ponies for a ride. Life on the Ranch is good.

We hope to soon get funding through the Texas Department of Aging and Disability services, DADS, for 20 of our residents, which will help a lot. But, we have room for four more residents and we are looking for various options to be able to invite others into our community.



*The 1st Annual Pie contest was an idea cooked up by RV Barry. Ranchers and staff made innumerable pies, which Don and Jerry had to taste and judge. (Ah, the heavy responsibility of management.) The evening ended with a little pie-on-the-head fun as Andrew, who had just pied Judy, got one from Jerry.*



### LESSONS FROM GUSTAV AND IKE

Happily Down Home Ranch was able to provide shelter and RV hookups for quite a few people getting out of the path of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. The Ranch can accommodate six big RV rigs and Hickory and Post Oak Lodges can take up to 24 each, plus we also have the bunkhouses in a real emergency.

One of the lessons we learned was that the generators we had on hand in case of a power failure were insufficient. We're looking to raise the money to get three generators: one to power the two lodges, one for the Pavilion and one for the greenhouses — so we don't lose a crop if the lights and fans go out.

It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, so we're glad to have learned from Gustav and Ike.

## GOING ICF/MR

When the old show *Full House* was still on, the youngest daughter, Michelle, would sometimes get in trouble and have to stand in the corner staring at the wall. After a while,

she should would begin to sing plaintively, "This is no fun. This is no fun."

JUDY'S



VIEWS

After a day of delving into the arcane acronyms and statutes relating to our latest foray into trying to establish a secure funding basis for our 20 happy residents to live

out their lives at the Ranch (should they choose) I too wind up staring at the wall and chanting, "This is no fun. This is no fun."

It's not that we find anything unnecessary in any of it. Quite the contrary, it's all necessary and good. It's just that there's so much of it, and it all has to fit seamlessly together like a 10,000 piece jigsaw puzzle. And the puzzle has to be assembled while we are simultaneously managing and assisting the lives of 20 very busy people. It's a challenge!

ICF/MR is a program that was implemented to give people with intellectual disabilities a community alternative to living in a state school or a nursing home. For the past several years, there has been a movement afoot to supplant ICF/MR facilities with HCS, a program in which "the money follows the person."

Ironically, the Ranch became certified as an HCS provider in 2005, and now we find ourselves swimming against the current by converting to ICF/MR. We retain our HCS certification, however, and hope to establish homes in the small towns surrounding the Ranch to offer a full range of living options to those we serve.

Meanwhile, we just keep on keeping on. Two houses are licensed, and we have three to go. It has been a long, difficult expensive process, and we are anxious to settle into our new program and do what we do best — livin', lovin' and havin' a darned good time of it.

# FIRE WISE AWARD MAKES 2008 CHAINSAW MANICURE THE BEST YET

By 9 a.m. a dozen or so chainsaws were at work in the Village as sawyers thinned trees, cut firewood and slashed brush. A group of swampers hauled everything out to the road, and two trailers came by periodically to load up and take masses of debris to the burn piles. For those who hadn't seen it before, it looked like a reign of destruction had descended on Down Home Ranch. But it was really just part of our annual beautification and site improvement program, the Texas Chainsaw Manicure.

Judge Evan Gonzales granted us a one-day exemption from the burn ban, enabling us to cut, haul and burn load after load of vegetation to a be disposed of. The brothers Hancock brought their two track dozers to keep feeding the fires. Overseen by folks from the Texas Forest Service, this mammoth project is a way for us to reduce the danger posed by dry brush and make DHR a safer community, as well as open up more space for residents and visitors to enjoy.

About 100 volunteers thinned trees, cleared brush, cut firewood, loaded, hauled and burned. Elgin's South Side Market provided a great bar-b-que lunch for the hungry workers, and participants each got an "I survived the Texas Chainsaw Manicure" t-shirt. (We have a few left, so contact Jerry to get one of your own.) A big "thanks ya'll" to everyone who participated.



I SURVIVED THE  
2008  
TEXAS  
CHAINSAW  
MANICURE

*Who's got the marshmallows? Residents and volunteers provide more fuel for the fire.*



*Interim Executive Director Tom Boggus of the Texas Forest Service, and Urban Forester Jan Fulkerson present a plaque and picture to Judy, Jerry and Kelly Horton in recognition of the Ranch's new status as a Fire Wise Community.*

## BOOK SIGNING AT DHR

We met Charlene Jourdan when we first moved to the Ranch in 1991. She was lobbying to improve our phone service. Back then we had to pay long distance to Austin, Taylor and most everywhere else. Charlene changed that.

A few weeks ago DHR played host to a book signing by Charlene, with a hundred or so people coming out to have her autograph copies of *Stuck in the Mud at Post Oak Island*.

We've know for a long time that Down Home Ranch is a part of what was once "Post Oak Island" — one of only two communities appearing on an 1876 map of Williamson County. Charlene's book explores the history of the people of this region, including some that are buried in Lawhon-Gardner cemetery on the grounds of DHR. One notable figure is Judge David Ervin Lawhon, who was married to Nancy Carr, from one of Stephen F. Austin's original band of 300 families.

The 1860s log cabin we recently moved

to the Ranch was built about three miles from here by the Craig family, and we're calling it the Post Oak Island log cabin. Charlene was gracious enough to mention our offer to purchase the cabin from the Elgin Historical Association in her book, and include a picture of Jerry and Judy alongside it. We have really enjoyed getting to know the history behind our little corner of the world, and our thanks go out to Charlene for including us in her work.



*Charlene signs books for members of the Coupland Civic Organization.*



*The Post Oak Island log cabin, pictured here, was recently moved to Down Home Ranch. We welcome any local history and renovation buffs to get in touch with Jerry and let us know how to restore and refurbish the cabin. It will be a terrific historical point of departure for visitors, and we're teaching DHR residents to become docents.*

# MOBLEY PRESENTATION AT UT ALUMNI CENTER A BIG HIT

In October, Down Home Ranch, the Down Syndrome Association of Central Texas and the Rise School brought Dr. William Mobley of Stanford University and Dr. Michael Harpold of the Down Syndrome Research and Treatment Foundation (DSRTF) to Austin for a special presentation. Over 200 people listened as Dr. Mobley explained the neuroscience behind new and exciting research that holds great promise for people with Down Syndrome.

Advances in medicine have enabled people with Down syndrome to lead longer, healthier lives, but cognitive dysfunction limits their independence. Dr. Mobley and his team of scientists and clinicians have begun examining the mechanisms behind these problems. Their efforts may one day provide treatments that will improve the lives of people with Down syndrome and could eventually lead to treatments for other cognitive disabilities, including Fragile X syndrome.

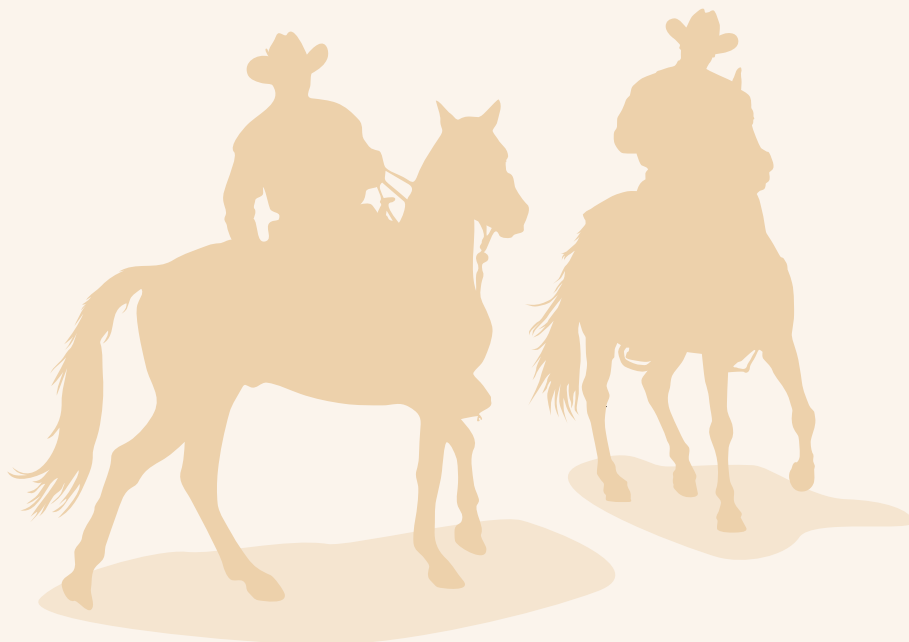
Such research takes a lot of time and a lot of money, and we're doing our best to provide support. DSRTF has awarded \$100,000 to the University of Arizona, \$800,000 to Stanford and \$500,000 to Johns Hopkins in the past year. This and help from the National Institute of Health can provide the funds that will change lives in dramatic ways.

We applaud the work of the Drs. Mobley and Harpold and encourage all to get behind and support their work. To learn more, visit [www.dsrtf.org](http://www.dsrtf.org)



Dr. Michael Harpold, Jerry Horton and Dr. William Mobley at the UT Alumni Center event.

# WE COULDN'T KEEP GOING WITHOUT FRIENDS



## BLESSINGS FOR US ALL



Fr. John Williams (a.k.a. "Rebekah's Dad") comes to the Ranch each year for a blessing of the animals, an expression of our respect and affection for the horses and other beasts that we care for and who, in return, enrich our lives.

BETTY ELEANOR VALENTINE

3-30-26 to 10-28-08

Betty Valentine was a true friend and supporter of Down Home Ranch, much beloved by many.

Rest in Peace.

# POINSETTIA TIME AGAIN

Poinsettias fill our greenhouses and our thoughts at the end of each year. Beginning in August with thousands of seedlings, we prune, water and care for the plants at the end of the summer and all through the autumn. But all the work pays off when we see an ocean of red blooms, and deliver these magnificent plants to our friends all over Central Texas.

It hasn't been an easy road. After erecting our first greenhouse in 1993, we began to see the potential for a cash crop that could create jobs and income. After the first greenhouse was damaged in a fire, Joe Matthews, an Abilene businessman, donated five Nexus greenhouses, creating a great opportunity. In 1999, we grew 2,000 poinsettias with the help of C.O. Smith, owner of the Hill Country Nursery in Austin. He guided us

through every step of the process, and soon we were experts in poinsettia production.

Today, we are growing 15,800 seedlings from Darby Greenhouses in Jacksonville. With help from hundreds of volunteers, we have been able to grow, package and deliver these poinsettias to individuals and other organizations who sell them to raise funds of their own.



*Dell Computer volunteers work hard at pinching the fall poinsettia crop in the greenhouses at Down Home Ranch. In 2008 the Ranch was very proud to host 18 different Dell groups, with over 600 people donating close to 2,000 hours of work. Thanks, Dell!*

Our poinsettias are one way that Down Home Ranch continues on the path to independence. They support our programs financially, provide

jobs for residents and staff, and enable us to contribute to our community. To all of you who have purchased poinsettias in the past, or who have supported us with your time and labor, thank you. May you all have a terrific holiday season, and we look forward to seeing you next year.

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