

KINDNESS RANCH

**A safe Wyoming haven
for former lab animals**
By Rebecca Wallick

Photography by Leah Yetter

What does freedom look like? For some lucky dogs, cats, pigs, sheep, alpacas, cows and horses, it's endless rolling green pasture and grassland, open skies full of sunshine and starlight, earth under their feet, and companions to play with. It's the absence of fear, pain and stress. It's a place in Wyoming called Kindness Ranch, the only USDA-approved sanctuary in the U.S. that takes in all sorts of animals used in laboratory research. At 1,000 acres, the ranch has ample room for the rescued animals who live there as well as for people who like to combine getting away and doing good.

Amy the Beagle greets another of the ranch's lab rescued animals as Animal Care and Behavior Manager Erica Stovken looks on.

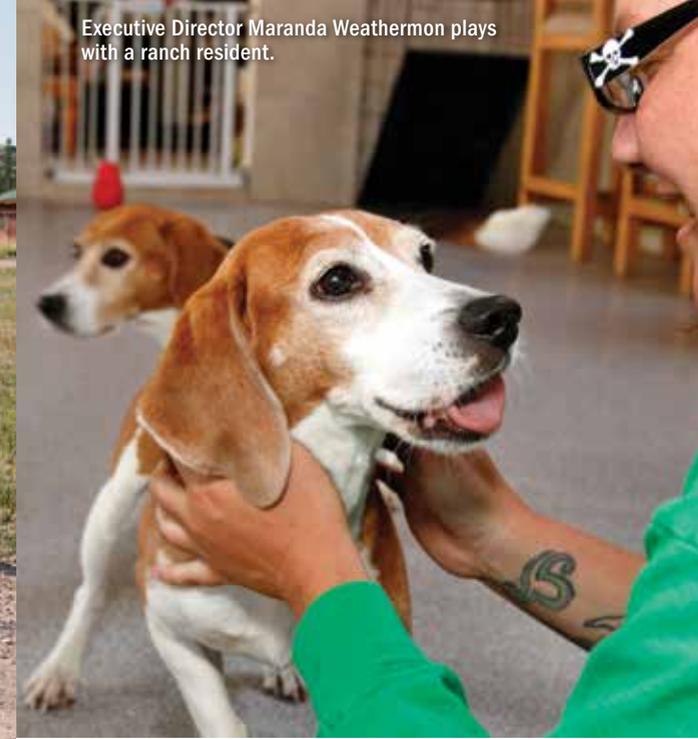
Since its creation in 2006, Kindness Ranch has helped more than 350 animals. Executive Director Maranda Weathermon says they have capacity for about 18 dogs and 20 cats. Given their unique history and lack of experience with normal life, newly arrived dogs and cats live in homelike group yurts (two for dogs, one for cats) with a full-time caregiver providing socialization and rehabilitation. When an animal is adopted, a new one arrives to take its place, and, not surprisingly, there are waiting lists.

Most of the dogs at Kindness Ranch are Beagles, and it was her love for the breed that led Portland, Ore., resident Amy Freeman to discover Kindness Ranch and arrange to volunteer there in June of this year. Amy rescued her first Beagle years ago; the puppy, whom she named Boomer, was a handful. “But he brought me so much joy. After Boomer, I adopted Belle, a 10-year-old Beagle (no more puppies!). Belle died at 13, and then I adopted Spike through Cascade Beagle Rescue.” Freeman’s volunteer work with Cascade Beagle Rescue steered her to the Beagle Freedom Project, which takes in Beagles from research labs. “I started following them on social media, and that led me to Kindness Ranch,” she said. “I came for the Beagles but fell in love with all of the dogs!”

Labs use animals to test human drugs, pesticides, household products, biomedical and dental research, and surgical techniques. Those using dogs prefer Beagles,



Volunteer Haley (on the left) and staff members Bridget and Kayley taking dogs for a walk.



Executive Director Maranda Weathermon plays with a ranch resident.

a medium-sized breed with a good disposition and a propensity for large litters. Of the estimated 60,000 dogs held in research laboratories each year, a significant number are Beagles. They and other lab animals come from Class A animal dealers authorized by the USDA to breed and sell them to research laboratories. When labs no longer need the animals, they are either euthanized or turned over to a rescue organization.

“Most of our animals were involved in pharmaceutical studies,” Weathermon says. “When the study is over, or the animals age out at seven or eight years old, we get them. The dogs mostly come from vet and vet tech schools, where they’re used as teaching aids for students to learn to draw blood, do ultrasounds and perform spay/

neuter surgeries. It’s the same story for the cats, although because they’re also used in food studies, some are fat when they arrive at the ranch.” The ranch’s pigs were used for pre-human trials for things like heart valves. The horses came from a Premarin (estrogen hormone replacement) facility, the sheep from a pharmaceutical research study and the alpacas were part of a fiber study using genetic modification.

Like other lab-animal rescue groups, Kindness Ranch has to juggle several ethical issues when working with facilities to take their animals. “Labs are finicky; they keep information close,” Weathermon says. “People trying to stop animal testing often block getting animals placed. So we play it neutral; we don’t name the labs,

we keep information confidential. It’s a very narrow line to walk to keep animals safe because it’s easy for the labs to just euthanize.” Ideally, animals would not be used in research or testing, but until that day arrives, the staff of Kindness Ranch focus their attention on making it easy for labs to transfer their animals to the ranch so they can be rehabilitated and live the balance of their lives as someone’s companion.

While volunteering at the ranch, Freeman immediately noticed the strong bond between the staff and the animals. “They truly treat these dogs like they’re their own, one of the family,” she says. “One Beagle, Texas, they hold him like a baby, rubbing his tummy before



Visitors Sandy and David on the steps of their guest yurt.

walks because that's what he wants; he won't go for a walk until he's held that way. I know from my rescue experience how hard it is to let them go; it must be even harder when you're living with them 24/7. It's heartbreaking and lovely at the same time."

Jenny Collins, also of Portland, accompanied Freeman on her June trip to the ranch. While she's volunteered in many settings — Reading with Rover with her own dog, Best Friends Sanctuary in Utah and Maui Humane Society's Beach Buddies program — she says that Kindness Ranch was special. "It was amazing, especially because I had just gone to Best Friends in April. The contrast was interesting. Best Friends is also amazing, but on a bigger scale — huge staff, their own vet clinic. Kindness Ranch... no one had heard of it and it has less financial support and staff. I loved it because it's so small. I felt like being there could make a difference."

Kindness Ranch is open every day between 9 AM and 5 PM. For day visitors, one of the eight full-time staff members will provide a tour. Vacationers like Freeman and Collins can rent a guest yurt and even bring their own dog if they like (the guest yurts have a small dog yard attached), volunteer with the animals, or simply enjoy the ranch's serenity. "Almost every weekend in summer is fully booked," Weathermon says. "Winter is our slowest time for visitors because of harsh weather." Rental fees pay for maintenance on the buildings, with the balance going to the animals' care.

"I can make a small difference." And as we know, small differences can add up to a greater good...

Volunteers are usually enlisted to help with dog and cat socialization. "We sat with the cats for an hour or more each morning," Collins says, "then we'd work with the dogs." Volunteers can also help clean dog and cat living spaces; stuff Kongs; and walk dogs, accompanied by a caregiver who is also walking one or two dogs, each with equipment suitable to their needs. "The staff would coach us, saying, for example, 'That one's reluctant, so don't pull,'" Collins recalls. "We'd walk each dog about a mile, usually on a gravel road

KINDNESS RANCH is located in eastern Wyoming, near the South Dakota and Nebraska borders. Their website includes photos of adoptable animals and information on how to donate and/or reserve a guest cabin (yurt). kindnessranch.org and [facebook.com/kindnessranch](https://www.facebook.com/kindnessranch)

Other Beagle/lab animal rescue resources

- BeFreegle Foundation: befreeglefoundation.org
- Beagle Freedom Project: bfp.org and [facebook.com/beaglefreedom](https://www.facebook.com/beaglefreedom)
- Cruelty Cutter app: cruelty-cutter.org

within the sanctuary, letting them sniff, pee, just be dogs. If a dog didn't want to walk, we'd hang out in the yard. Some were new to collars and leashes — it felt like being back in Puppy 101 class." The morning and evening shifts are two to three hours each, and volunteers can choose how much they work on any given day. Collins noted that because of its remoteness, the ranch has no internet service. "I read four books — it was awesome!" she said.

Guests renting a yurt also have the option of hosting a dog overnight: one dog per yurt per night, chosen by staff. It's another way to help socialize the dogs and make them more adoptable. "The first night we had a Pit Bull, Frieda," says Collins. "She was the sweetest, but shy at first. Frieda discovered the loft. She would peek at us from above with a big smile. That night, she slept with me. She spread herself over the entire bed, leaving me a tiny sliver in one corner." On the third night of their stay, Collins and Freeman hosted Zoey, a Coonhound. Sweet but nervous and shy, Zoey took some coaxing to get on the couch, where she ended up sleeping. At four in the morning, Collins took Zoey out to pee, and when they came back in, she asked Zoey to get on the bed. "And she did! She was very polite, curled in a corner, so sweet. She touched my heart. You often feel sad for shelter animals, but here, truly, this is the next best thing if they can't be in a home."

The ultimate mission at Kindness Ranch is to place all adoptable animals in loving homes.



Clockwise from above left: the dogs enjoy their new-found freedom; Erica gets encouragement as she "scoops" the dog area; the wide open spaces of the Wyoming landscape offer an inspired setting; guests are encouraged to interact with the animals; Frieda the sweet-natured Pit Bull gets a hug from Bridget; the guest yurt accommodations are well-appointed and spacious.



For the dogs, potential adopters are required to come to the ranch. “They must come to us because our dogs are so special, not for every adopter,” Weathermon explains. “An eight-year-old dog who’s only been on sawdust or in a wire kennel—they need the right home. So we don’t ship them.”

Sadly, not every animal taken in by the ranch can be rehabilitated and rehomed. “We keep animals deemed unadoptable for the balance of their lives,” says Weathermon. For example, Odie, who’s 12 now, has severe medical issues. Kennel spinning destroyed the cartilage in his elbows and knees. He also despises most men and children, so he’s not an adoption candidate. He’s on lots of pain-management medications, and every two weeks, we take him to visit a chiropractor. We spare no expense for animals

needing extra medical care.”

A stay at Kindness Ranch inevitably means confronting the issue of testing products, drugs and surgical techniques on animals. That moral dilemma hit close to home for Collins, whose mother was treated for breast cancer. As she notes, before most drugs are tested on humans in clinical trials, they’re used on animals. “I don’t want research done on animals, but if my mom is in a clinical trial, would I want her to receive a completely untested drug? It’s easy to say I love animals, but when it affects me personally, what will I accept? Kindness Ranch was eye opening in ways I never expected, and my thinking on these issues was changed by my time there.”

After learning more about the use of Beagles in labs, and animal testing in general, Freeman vowed

to educate others while also making changes in how she buys products. “I started by downloading Cruelty Cutter, a free app created by the Beagle Freedom Project.” The app allows the user to scan bar codes to learn whether a product is tested on animals. When Freeman runs out of a particular household cleaner, shampoo or cosmetic, she replaces it with a cruelty-free product. “I’m making small changes, being more conscious,” Freeman says. “I can make a small difference.” And as we know, small differences can add up to a greater good, so be inspired by the staff and animals of Kindness Ranch: add your own small changes to those of Freeman and others and help create a world where animal testing is no longer necessary. That would truly make a big difference. 

HELP THE RANCH EXPAND

Kindness Ranch currently has a campaign on GoFundMe, and in early 2018, they’ll embark on a major fundraising effort to cover the cost of two new yurts—one for dogs, one for cats—so they can help even more animals. Each yurt costs \$100K, so the goal is lofty, but incredibly worthwhile.

The ranch’s vacation home can be rented by visitors.

