

Using animals, Hernando woman seeks to operate congregate care home for children



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Thursday, April 7, 2016 10:00am

BROOKSVILLE — For as long as Felicia Bass can remember, she has been surrounded by animals.

A member of the famous Cristiani circus family, known especially for their equestrian expertise, she grew up experiencing how animals can touch people's lives.

For the past several years, she has been making use of that special bond to help at-risk children who are experiencing behavioral or mental health issues.

Now, through her Human and Animal Life Foundation, Bass is seeking a special exception use permit from the county to operate a congregate care home for children on a 9-acre parcel at 18340 Powell Road, south of Brooksville. The Planning and Zoning Commission will conduct a public hearing on the permit Monday.

Bass describes her program as a "boy's ranch," geared to mostly teenage boys who have been in the foster care system, although some younger boys have participated in the faith-based programs at the ranch. Many of the youngsters have bounced through numerous foster homes because of behavior issues.

The home will have a maximum of 12 beds.

The boys would attend local schools or alternative programs but would live at the ranch, learning about and caring for the animals, starting off with dogs and working up to goats, alpacas, horses and finally the camels that live there during their off-season from traveling around the country. All in all, Bass said, she has approximately 60 animals, including a herd of horses, many of which were rescued after their racing days.

She also provides programs for local students who are in need of the type of therapy she can provide.

Some of the animals are familiar in the community. The ponies that are used for rides at some events, including at this year's Hernando County Fair, come from the ranch. She also provides the assorted creatures that will make up the fair's petting zoo this year.



Courtesy of Felicia Bass

Children visit camels on Felicia Bass' ranch south of Brooksville, where she wants to open a group home for at-risk boys.

Bass has many plans for expanding the programs and offerings at the ranch. She is currently working with one young man who is 18, and she plans to develop a transition program for other foster children aging out of the program so they can get the best possible start on their independence.

In addition, she hopes to begin producing organic food on the site and, some time down the road, have a second house for a program for at-risk girls.

Her basic philosophy is that people should live the most natural and healthy life possible, and that means living with animals and nature.

"This is what we feel that God has intended," Bass said.

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Foundation info

For more information about Felicia Bass and her Human and Animal Life Foundation, visit humananimallife.org.

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