



# a Place to Call Home

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PHOTOGRAPHY: SARAH UNDERWOOD

Brigitte and Alois Bohmer of Heaven's Gate.

Growing up, children often dream of owning their own horse or pony, and many children relish every second at a petting zoo, wishing they could take all the animals home. For one Southern Alberta couple, this dream is a reality.



**Brigitte and Alois Bohmer have run Heaven's Gate, an animal sanctuary, for the last two years on their 160-acre parcel of land, on Chapel Rock Rd., in the County of Pincher Creek. Every day they wake up and spend time with their own menagerie of horses and other fun furry friends.**

**THE BOHMERS' LOVE OF ANIMALS** stems back to their life in Quebec, where they lived for 14 years after moving to Canada from Germany. "In Quebec we started to take care of raccoons, because the neighbour brought us a baby raccoon. Then every year the SPCA gave us more and more orphaned raccoons [to take care of]," says Brigitte. "It was sometimes really hard because we had no helpers and nobody likes to take care of raccoons." Brigitte and Alois also looked after marmots, birds, squirrels and dogs. At one time the couple was taking care of 12 dogs that needed rehabilitation because the unwanted animals had developed some unwanted habits. Fortunately, Brigitte says that after a couple of years of training, the dogs were ready to be adopted into loving homes.

Unlike in Quebec, Brigitte will need a licence to look after wildlife in Alberta, and she indicates that she's been so busy with building their property that getting a licence has been put on the back burner. But now that winter is coming, she plans on applying for it, and once licensed, she says that along with other wildlife, she would even like to take in cougars and bears.

Today, Heaven's Gate is home to three llamas, four dogs, four cats, one calf, one goat, one raccoon, and 10 horses. A baby filly named Cinderella, born crippled, was eating grass by Brigitte's front porch when I arrived at the farm. "I saw Cinderella, and it



Heaven's Gate is home to three llamas.

broke my heart. She was with adult horses and she didn't have a good life because she couldn't really run. So we bought her, and my veterinarian said we can do something about her legs, maybe an operation," Brigitte explains. That love and care extends to all the animals Brigitte and Alois take in, and Brigitte says that even though they rehabilitated animals in

Quebec and released them back to loving homes, she would never let any animals in Heaven's Gate go to another home.

Living the dream, surrounded by mountains and four-legged friends doesn't come without obstacles; and more animals mean more responsibility and more cost. Brigitte says it gets really hard. "I'm asking everywhere



for help. Per horse it's \$600 to \$700 a month to feed and ride them," she says. "But they are all my children." The animals Brigitte has acquired don't come free either. In some cases the Bohmers still have to pay for the animal even if it is unwanted.

Heaven's Gate has only been around a couple of years so the Bohmers are still working on building the property. So far, they have built a log house complete with wind turbine, solar panels and a well for all their basic needs. Corrals, barns and shelters were built during the first year at the sanctuary, but as the list of animals grows, so does the need for more shelters. "We need shelters and we need trails because nobody was living on this property before. We have dead-wood everywhere, and the worst part of the work is cleaning the property and cutting the wood," says Brigitte. Heaven's Gate is in need of helping hands and people willing to donate their time to train and ride the horses, as well as perform maintenance work. The sanctuary is also constantly in need of supplies such as hay, feed, halters and saddles for all 10 horses.

The Bohmers do receive some help from students and volunteers from World Wide Opportunities on



The Bohmers have included a wind turbine and solar panels in the development of their property.

## "It takes a lot of patience and love to care for another creature but it's worth it."

Organic Farms. People come from all over the world to lend a helping hand for a couple of weeks at a time, and in return receive room and board. Brigitte says people have come from as far away as Germany, Switzerland, France and Japan. "Our helpers are not carpenters; they're students, and young. But it's a great help and it's amazing so many young people are coming, and they like to work with animals. The animals change their life the three or four weeks they're staying here. It's amazing," she smiles.

Neighbours of Heaven's Gate also

try to help out as much as they can. In the winter their neighbours will lend the couple a tractor for snow removal, and when a new animal is coming to the farm, they will lend a horse trailer, as the Bohmers don't yet own one.

With three grown children living back in Germany, the animals have become Brigitte and Alois's babies. It takes special people to put an animal's needs ahead of their own, yet this is what the Bohmers live for. Brigitte says all she wants people to do when it comes to owning and caring for animals is "think twice." Make sure

that owning an animal is right for you, because all animals deserve a chance and it's unfair to the animal when it's moved around from family to family, or placed in a shelter when it is no longer wanted.

Brigitte believes in the saying "We are all God's creatures," and knows that there is a home for every unwanted animal, even if people call her "crazy" for loving the unwanted; and reminds people to "Think with your heart, it takes a lot of patience and love to care for another creature but it's worth it." 