

A Mission to Save Wild Horses

A Special Interview With Erin Anna Phillips

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Becker, and I'm so excited that Anne has nominated Erin Anna Phillips for a Game Changer award, and we have Erin with us today to talk about why she's so wildly passionate about horses and what she's done with that passion and where that passion potentially came from. So, we're so thankful to have Erin. Erin, congratulations on your Game Changer award, and I am thankful that you're taking a few minutes to talk to me today about how and why you became so passionate about horses. So welcome!

Erin Anna Phillips:

Thank you. It's such an honor to be on here today.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, Erin, when Anne nominated you, she said that from a very young age you had a resonance, that you were really focused on horses. Can you remember a moment that you were like, "Oh my gosh, I love them." I think Anne said you love all animals, but that horses really became your passion. How did that happen?

Erin Anna Phillips:

It's really been ever since I can remember. I don't really remember a time where I actually saw a horse and thought, "Oh, I really love that animal." It's just kind of been a part of me ever since I guess I was born.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. And you do a lot of – Anne said you have turtles, dogs, cats, hamsters, fish and all sorts of things, but horses, did you grow up with horses or did you get a horse at a certain age, or did you get into a rescue at a certain age? How did the evolution of your passion, specifically I think with horses, come about?

Erin Anna Phillips:

Yeah, so when I was really young, my siblings took riding lessons, so I would go along with them and pet the horses and just be around them. Then when I was about 7 years old, my dad and mom got me a little miniature horse who was about 5 months old at the time, and so I've owned a horse since then. And so, then when I was about 5 or 6, I got into the wild horses after listening to a series of documentaries on "Cloud: Wild Stallion of the Rockies," and that's what really got me into more of the wild horses, the mustangs.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And so, for listeners and readers that don't know about anything, maybe this is the first time that they've heard about wild mustangs or wild horses, can you talk a little bit about what you learned

when you educated yourself, you listened to this documentary, and how did that move your soul, and in turn, what happened next?

Erin Anna Phillips:

So basically, the documentary series followed the life of one horse named Cloud, which is the same horse I ended up naming my mini after. Every so often, the government will round up horses in the different herd areas. And so, including in that documentary was a roundup, and I remember just being really sad seeing the horses taken out of their homes. Being really young, I couldn't really process all the reasons to why it happened, so when I got older, I really started researching and just learning all the facts of why it happens, why it shouldn't happen and what really goes on with that.

And so, the numbers, everything has gotten worse since that time, basically that more wild horses have been taken out. Last year there were 20,193 wild horses and burros removed from the wild last year, and it's mainly due to livestock ranching on public lands. There are plenty of public lands for the wild horses, and due to livestock ranching, the ranchers kill a lot of the natural predators that would help the wild horse population stay in check.

And even though – I know a lot of people would think that livestock ranching would be really important, that we should take the wild horses out because it's feeding people, but only 2% of our meat comes off of public lands, and that could easily be made up in all of these off-range pastures that the wild horses are placed in when they're removed. There's a lot. And because of the amount of horses that have been taken out, there are 62,398 in holding pens just sitting at-

Dr. Karen Becker:

In jail, in horse jail.

Erin Anna Phillips:

Basically. And we're paying for them. Our tax dollars pay to remove the horses, take care of them.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And-

Erin Anna Phillips:

So, it's a really messed up situation.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, it is. It is a really messed up situation. Erin, once – so, the government is funding-

Erin Anna Phillips:

Yes, ma'am, the Bureau of Land Management.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Okay, Bureau of Land Management is funding the rounding up of horses and then – that alone is a horrific thing. Then they transport them and put them, basically, in holding areas for them to just die eventually.

Erin Anna Phillips:

Yes, if they're not adopted, but over 60,000 horses, I have a hard time seeing them all being adopted by the end of their lifetimes. So, the Bureau of Land Management often tries to come up with programs that help the horses get adopted. One of their most recent ones was called the Adoption Incentive Program, and that is where they offered \$1,000 to each person who adopted a wild horse.

And what ended up happening is people would adopt the wild horse, keep them for the amount of time the Bureau of Land Management required, which was one year, and then sell them to slaughter.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Slaughter.

Erin Anna Phillips:

So, they'd end up making about \$1,500 off of each horse, and there is one family who I believe got around 20 horses, somewhere around that number, and just was making money. And unfortunately, that's happening a lot.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, how did you get involved? Do you work with a specific educational platform, Erin? When people hear about this, it's maddening. What can we do?

Erin Anna Phillips:

So, there are some really great organizations out there. The American Wild Horse Campaign is one, the Cloud Foundation is another. The Cloud Foundation I've been volunteering with for the past six years. And then about two years ago, I started my own horse rescue, and I'm also using that as an education platform. It's Mustang Mission. I started rescuing the horses early last year, and so I've been able to rescue three since then. Not a whole lot. It's starting out small, but we're constantly growing.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Of course. Yeah. And also, you're incredibly young. Three horses are a lot. That's a full-time job right there. That's a lot. But that's amazing. And so, when we think about this horrific situation – so, first of all, does your blog, does your educational platform talk, of course, highlight the issues, but then also how if people are listening or reading this information, watching this information, how they could get involved?

Erin Anna Phillips:

Yeah, so a great way to get involved is to follow one of the websites I mentioned. They often send out action alerts to where you can comment to the government on proposed gathers, removals. And then another great thing is to call your representatives and your senators and tell them what you think about the situation. Often, giving numbers and facts is really good because it is more convincing than basically an emotional story about what is going on. And so those, as the websites I mentioned before, they give a lot of that. They're really good at educating, giving all the facts and everything you need.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Erin, since you started becoming educated about this horrific environmental event going on involving incredible, intelligent, emotionally sensitive creatures, do you feel like there's been any, I'm going to call it forward motion, any steps in the right direction or do you feel like we're still at the need for mass education to be able to move the dial in a positive direction? Or do you get any hint since you've been involved that we could be in any way helping to educate people enough to make viable change?

Erin Anna Phillips:

There are definitely a lot of people that know about this situation now, and a lot of people that are taking action. Unfortunately, it is getting worse-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Erin Anna Phillips:

-the situation, but at the same time, people are working really hard, and there are some very small forward movements. But it seems as you get one forward step, it's like three steps back.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Yep.

Erin Anna Phillips:

One of the main issues is there is a lot of corruption between the livestock ranchers because the livestock ranchers are paid by big corporations, between the corporations and the Bureau of Land Management. It goes to a really deep level, so it's a lot to fight against.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, it is.

Erin Anna Phillips:

Which can be more difficult.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Which is incredibly difficult, yes, and also soul-sucking. When you look at the amount of red tape and unethical relationships and payoffs and money, it just becomes potentially not just

daunting, but exasperating. So I have to ask, when you get up in the morning, how do you move forward and not let the circumstances, the weight of this get you down? Or let me phrase it a different way. You're really passionate about this subject. What moves you? What do you love most? What moves you to keep wanting to fight this battle?

Erin Anna Phillips:

Well, I really think that to me, it's really, really important to protect animals because they are God's creation. Even though there's so much bad with the situation going on, there is still a lot of good, and just really, the horses are honestly what really keeps a lot of us within the advocacy field going, just to protect them and keep them safe. I'm really grateful for my horses, my mustangs outside because they really are a bright light in those difficult situations, and just seeing that they've ended up in a good – even though they were removed, they went through a lot of trauma, which they never should have, they ended up in a good situation. That is really my goal for a lot of the mustangs that come out of holding and the reason why I started this rescue.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's wonderful. Your passion's beautiful, the educational commitment, and I think above all, we're wired as humans to – we should be wired to want to care for this animal kingdom, be respectful, and part of that's the educational piece. Even if it feels like it's an overwhelming uphill battle, that doesn't negate the fact that we are ethically responsible for caring for all of the animal kingdom, and that's exactly what you're doing. I'm so proud of you, and I'm so-

Erin Anna Phillips:

Thank you.

Dr. Karen Becker:

-inspired by the work that you're doing. So, Erin, if you would want the world to know one thing about this really important platform, this initiative that you're involved with, what would it be?

Erin Anna Phillips:

Well, I think one of the main things would be just to know that every animal is worth saving. There are so many people that just think mustangs are basically trash and they're not worth anything, but there are so many mustangs that have really gone to high levels that are incredible companions. And just to remember that, like you were saying, it is our duty to protect and preserve and save these animals.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Erin, I'm so thankful for Anne for nominating you for a Game Changer award. I'm thankful for your viable light and spirit in you that is driving you to want to become wildly passionate in the field of education. It's out of people knowing more that they can make better, wiser decisions, and so the fact that you are willing to educate people about this topic is the first step of meaningful change, and you're doing that, and I'm so thankful-

Erin Anna Phillips:

Oh, thank you.

Dr. Karen Becker:

-that you are. Tell us again the website or where people should go if they want to learn more or read your information or get involved. Where would people find you?

Erin Anna Phillips:

So, people can go to my website. It's www.MustangMission.Blogspot.com. I also have a newsletter list that people can sign up to, to get updates and alerts. I'm constantly doing new things and it's exciting changes. As always with a rescue, there's always a lot going on.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, there is always a lot going on. You're a busy woman.

Erin Anna Phillips:

Yes.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, yeah.

Erin Anna Phillips:

Yes.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, it's beautiful. Your passion is apparent. We're so thankful there are people like you around the world that are willing to educate, put their heart and soul into helping people have a better understanding of these issues so that hopefully as more people become educated about these issues, we can collectively shift the dial and afford better change for the animals that so desperately need it. You are a vital, young member that has decades ahead of meaningful advocacy, and we're so thankful for what you're doing. Erin, thanks for educating us this morning as well.

Erin Anna Phillips:

You're welcome. It was a pleasure.