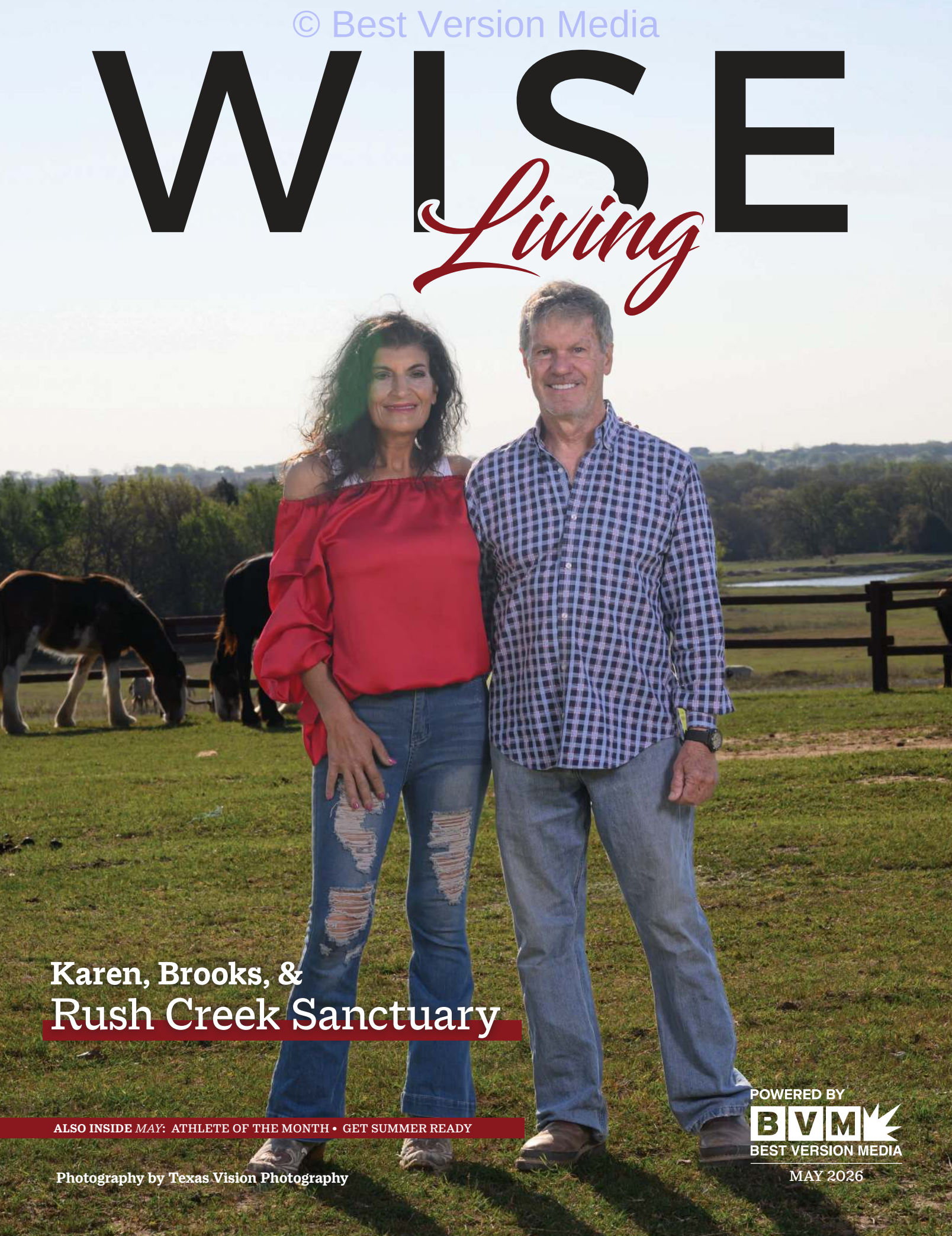


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WISE *Living*

A man and a woman are standing in a grassy field. The woman is on the left, wearing a red off-the-shoulder top and blue jeans with patches. The man is on the right, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt and blue jeans. In the background, there are horses grazing in a field with a wooden fence and trees in the distance.

**Karen, Brooks, &
Rush Creek Sanctuary**

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A SANCTUARY FOR SECOND CHANCES, FOR ANIMALS AND PEOPLE

SERVING VETERANS, FAMILIES, AND RESCUED EQUINES, THIS WISE COUNTY SANCTUARY IS CREATING CONNECTION, HEALING, AND HOPE

ARTICLE BY MICHELLE DOAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE & LISA DUTY, TEXAS VISION PHOTOGRAPHY

For Karen and Dr. Brooks Trotter, life at Rush Creek Sanctuary is not something they planned, it is something they were called into.

Karen grew up in San Francisco before her family moved to Texas when her father took a manager position with the Texas Rangers in 1977. Brooks' upbringing looked very different, moving from place to place as the son of an Army physician. Their paths eventually led them to Wise County, where Brooks purchased the ranch more than 30 years ago, long before it would become what it is today.

What transformed the land into a sanctuary was not a business idea or long-term plan, it was a deeply personal season of hardship.

When Karen became terminally ill, she began rescuing mini donkeys, originally as a way to cope with pain and find healing. What started small quickly became something neither of them expected.

"Becoming ill and receiving healing is my testimony," Karen shares. "Animals heal, and I wanted others to experience that same hope."

At the time, Karen admits she was actually



afraid of horses.

"I was terrified of them," she says. "I never thought I would be around them."

But everything changed the day she visited a kill pen.

"My heart broke. Seeing the condition so many of them were in, I fell in love right there."

That moment marked the beginning of a mission that now impacts hundreds of lives.

Three years ago, after witnessing the physical and emotional healing Karen experienced, Brooks made a pivotal decision, he offered his land as a 501c3 so others could come and experience that same restoration.

Today, Rush Creek Sanctuary is home to around 60 animals, including draft horses rescued from kill pens, mini donkeys, longhorns, buffalo, and even the occasional raccoon or deer. Many of the horses come from severe neglect cases, including a large rescue effort in partnership with the American Humane Society, where dozens of starving and neglected equines were found homes and given a second chance.

But the impact of the sanctuary reaches far beyond the animals.



Because most of the rescues receive training and are become therapy horses Rush Creek has served more than 800 veterans and their families, many struggling with PTSD, along with first responders, children with special needs, and individuals searching for peace and connection.

Karen describes the most rewarding moments as the ones you cannot plan for.

"Watching a veteran begin to heal right in front of you, or seeing a child speak for the first time while interacting with a donkey, those moments change you."

A typical day at the sanctuary is anything but quiet. It is filled with feeding, training, cleaning pens, hosting tours, and spending hours working alongside the animals. Some days include retreats for veterans, offering them a place to rest, reset, and reconnect.

Still, it is often the animals themselves that bring the most joy, and personality.

Chicken, one of the smallest mini donkeys, has earned the nickname "mayor" of the sanctuary. Despite his size, he watches over the herd and makes sure everyone stays in line.



Then there is Pepper, the mischievous paint donkey who has figured out how to unlatch gates, let the other donkeys onto the porch, and scatter pillows all across the ranch just for fun.

Through it all, Karen remains grounded in what matters most.

One of her greatest challenges has been learning to let go, rehoming animals so they can continue rescuing others in need. It is a constant balance between love and purpose.

Education is also a central part of their mission. "We want people to understand what is happening and how they can be part of the solution," Karen says. She is deeply passionate about raising awareness around animal abuse and the realities of the kill pen pipeline, where hundreds of thousands of equines are sent to Mexico and Canada each year for slaughter and human consumption. It is a billion-dollar industry, with kill buyers often paid around \$1 per pound, and many of these animals are still just babies.

Despite the long days and emotional work, Karen and Brooks have found their rhythm, and their peace.

"Our favorite time of day is 5:00 on the porch," Karen says. "We sit in the rockers together, surrounded by the horses."

The Wise County community has become an extension of the sanctuary, showing up through volunteering, sponsorships, and support. Karen is especially grateful for Catherine and David Frazy who consistently step in to help, calling them a true extension of their mission.

For those new to Wise County, Karen says the heart of the community is what makes it truly special. There is a deep respect for Texas history, beautiful landmarks, and the outdoors, but even more than that, a strong and supportive community spirit.

Supporting Rush Creek Sanctuary is one of the best ways to experience that connection firsthand, while also helping educate others on how to recognize and prevent animal abuse and neglect, and giving both animals and people a second chance at hope and healing.

As for the legacy they hope to leave behind, it is simple, but powerful:

"To be kind to animals. To love them. And to always take care of our veterans when they come home."

At Rush Creek Sanctuary, that mission is lived out every single day, one animal, one person, and one story at a time.

