

# The West Australian

---

## Perth couple give up everything to care for mistreated horses of Egypt

**Amanda Keenan** The West Australian  
Fri, 27 January 2017 2:25PM

Amanda Keenan



 Credit: Ljubica Bubana

Jill Barton proudly points out the stylish features of her caravan: a cute leather couch, a coffee machine, a sound system and a compact ensuite and kitchen fancier than you'd find in many homes. There are natty little retractable flyscreens on the windows, and even a tiny wine fridge.

But it was the simple luxuries Jill yearned for once she and husband Warren slipped off into semi-retirement: the nurse and the builder would pull up at an assortment of random beaches and parks, living off the grid and going wherever the white line led them.

Then “everything changed”.

Now, the 7m grey nomad's dream sits parked not in a quaint country caravan park but in a barren lot out the back of a winery in the Swan Valley. And instead of cruising around the countryside together, the couple are on opposite sides of the world: Warren lives in the caravan. Jill lives in Cairo.

“We were going to semi-retire but we decided to do a Europe trip first, and a month of volunteer work in Egypt before we headed off on our caravan trip,” Jill recalls.



📷 Warren and Jill Barton at home in the Swan Valley. Credit: Nic Ellis/The West Australian

The animal lovers helped out at a horse and donkey rescue in Cairo for a few weeks and were appalled and devastated by what they saw. Crippled horses sent back out to work on broken legs. Disabled donkeys being more brave than stubborn. “Dancing” horses with gangrenous tongues from cruel hardware. Infected wounds. Abscesses from incorrectly administered injections. Neglect and abuse. Majestic animals worked into the ground and left to die.

“It was actually Warren who said ‘You look around here and it makes you want to do more’,” Jill says.

“Dobber,” Warren goads, as they sit in their van in the valley during one of Jill’s rare trips home – the couple sold their house to start Egypt Equine Aid and Warren only manages to get over about once a year.

Warren was particularly touched by the fact many of the working horses in Cairo’s pyramid communities were descended from Australia’s storied war horses.



 Credit: Ljubica Bubana

“My grandfather was there in the war and so was my dad,” he says. “They both went through Cairo in World War I and World War II.

“I didn’t know my father was there till he died and we went through some photographs and saw him at the pyramids.”

Jill, too, was taken by the link. “That’s one thing that really got my heart when I learnt that. Because the horses we took to the war, everybody thinks that we shot them all. But that’s actually not true.”

Extraordinarily, she says many of the horses brought into Egypt Equine Aid’s free hospital still exhibit the beautiful qualities of Australia’s Walers and are wearing handmade bridles and heavy military driving bits – museum pieces that date back to another time.

They returned home from that holiday determined to go back and do more to help the horses.

The couple concede it all sounds pretty crazy. Despite their conviction, even they questioned the enormity of what they were about to do.

“We were up and down with it a bit,” Jill admits. “I had to work as much as I could to raise money to get back there.”



 Credit: Jeff Robson

That’s when they sold their house and rented a property with stables in Cairo sight unseen, returning a few months later in mid-2014. Their first job was to take in a bunch of horses from another rescue group that had run into hard times.

“Straight away the horses came to us – we didn’t even have a bucket to give them some water in. Then Warren helped get a few things set up and running properly, like door locks and things like that because the houses are quite primitive. He stayed for two months, then he came back to set up the charity in Australia.”

Warren says it was hard to leave his wife behind. “The biggest criteria that I had before I left was that her environment was safe and secure.”

But Jill insists she’s not the one in danger. She says the treatment of horses in Egypt – while often born of ignorance rather than deliberate cruelty – is so bad she’s put the rest of her life on hold.

“It’s the worst I’ve seen anywhere. I haven’t been everywhere but ... I think in India you probably do have vets with better knowledge. The vets in Egypt, because of the bad education system, they graduate and they’ve never even touched a horse.”

Recently, a local vet applied for a position at her fledgling clinic. She asked him to practise using the double stethoscope on a patient so he could show a visiting school group the following day. “He was looking at the horse and I said ‘What’s wrong?’ and he said ‘I don’t know where the heart is.’”

Still, she's reluctant to criticise the Egyptians, who have welcomed her and protect her. "The people are very friendly and they look out for you as well. It's hard because on one hand you criticise them for being so cruel but on the other hand say they're really nice people. But it's true, if a woman screamed in the street there would be 20 people there seeing what's going on."

The pyramid communities of Cairo are a long way from where self-described "horsy person" Jill grew up in Belmont and Mukinbudin, working at stables and playing polo cross. Later, she'd become involved in animal welfare, signing up as a founding committee member of rescue group SAFE Perth and helping Animals Asia on bear-rescue projects.

Jill was working as a pathology nurse when she and Warren had their equine epiphany. After a few months together in Cairo, he came back to WA to establish Egypt Equine Aid as a registered charity. Jill's brother-in-law, local businessman Jeff Robson, has also come on board as a non-executive chairman. He helps out with the administrative side of things, and also documented Jill's work during a work trip to Egypt.

"We live in such an amazing place and you can't believe how terrible it is over there – the people, how poor they are," Jeff says.

"They've got to feed their kids; if it's a choice between feeding their kids and looking after the animals they're probably going to feed their kids so you can understand a little bit. But at the same time, some of the things are really simple for them to do and they don't do them because they don't understand."

It was tough to begin with but with the help of some Australian donations and fundraisers in the UK "it's grown and grown and now it's almost supporting itself, thank God", Jill says.

But it's a hard slog. At any given time there are about 30 inpatients at the clinic. "Then the volume of outpatients varies from day to day, sometimes we might have 10, sometimes just a few," she says. There are just a few of them on the tiny team.

*It had been so abused it would just stand in the corner of the horse box and wouldn't come near us. And now he comes and puts his head up on me and gives me a cuddle.*

“We go out to the pyramid area because that’s where it’s the worst. When we go there we might hand out (eye) covers because they use chains and strings that cut into their nose. Every time we go out there we end up with about three inpatients coming back with us.”

A large part of the Egypt Equine Aid service is education, helping teach the locals how to care for their animals and when to recognise something is wrong. She finds it hard to send a message of compassion to families in struggling communities who see the horses as a valuable piece of machinery that must work right up until the point it completely breaks down.

While villagers can occasionally be caught off guard by the foreign female’s very forthright nature, they also have a grudging respect. One man, in a New York Times story last year, described her as “tough and rude” while at the same time conceding that they “need her help”.

For her part, Jill makes it clear that the free clinic is there to help their animals, not seize them. “We’re a free hospital so they can bring their horse, get it fixed and take it back again because they need them to work and if we did that we would just be full within a week and we couldn’t help any more.”

The clinic also has a “no buy” policy to discourage cruel owners from injuring horses for quick cash.

Although she’ll occasionally make an exception – as she did recently for a disabled pregnant donkey forced to pull a cart carrying two men, and towing a horse, for more than 30km.

“That really upset me,” she says. “I mean, I’m pretty tough and I don’t usually cry but I had to walk away. I have an assistant who interprets for me and stuff and I said to him ‘This donkey can’t leave here’. This only happened just before I left, the day I was leaving they actually let us buy her. She should give birth OK even though she’s all twisted at the back.”

Jill says donkeys only have a reputation for being stubborn because they’re so intelligent that they’re naturally suspicious. “And they are forgiving. We’ve got one there – they cut its ears off for some reason. This is another one I wouldn’t let leave. It had been so abused it would just stand in the corner of the horse box and wouldn’t come near us. And now he comes and puts his head up on me and gives me a cuddle.”

This particular donkey is part of an extraordinary success story: “He and four of our horses, we rehomed them – because we rehome as many as we can if we have rescued them – they have gone to be therapy horses and donkey at a psychiatric hospital, and the very first in the Middle East. So now people will be coming especially for equine therapy. And the horses which were rescued will be helping the traumatised people.”



 Credit: Jeff Robson

The main goal now is to raise enough money to buy some land and build a hospital. A Brisbane architectural firm has already offered to donate plans for the facility and the Australian Embassy in Cairo has given a grant for an X-ray machine.

“There’s no point me just being there patching up some horses and then when I leave, it’s finished. So we want to build a proper working hospital where foreign vets can come and train the local vets. Then they can filter out into the villages and educate the people.” That way, Jill says, they’ll help create real generational change.

She would love WA vets to consider giving some of their valuable time and skills. She’s also hopeful West Australian horse lovers might feel moved to donate towards the hospital.

“The sooner that happens the better because the building standards over there are shocking, so Warren can then come and supervise the construction,” Jill says of a semi-retirement that pretty much nobody dreamt of.