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Of course

A small idea has blossomed into booming business for two Texas nuns who breed miniature horses.

by Cheré Coen

The Franciscan Poor Clare Nuns of Brenham, Texas, are a cloistered order devoted to prayer. Although they depend on alms from those who seek their prayers, some sort of income is required to maintain their order.

“We try to discover and develop the talents God has given us,” Sister Angela said.

Years ago, they bred birds and cats for pet stores as an income, but when someone offered to buy their business they accepted.

“A few months down the road we realized we still needed an income,” Sister Angela explained.

At the same time, they were hoping to attract children out on Saturdays to say the rosary. When Sister Bernadette spotted an ad for miniature horses in 1981, an idea sprung. Until she found out the price — \$3,000 a piece.

Sister Bernadette realized one horse fetching that amount of money was better than the small change of birds and cats and decided to ask for a donation, Sister Angela said. To her surprise, the owner of the horse donated a mare and another donor offered a stallion. Soon after, “Ginger” and “Count” arrived.

“That was all it took,” Sister Angela said. “We were off and running. We’ve been buying and selling miniature horses ever since.”

Today, the monastery an hour outside of Houston averages 15 to 20 foals per year and offers tours to the public. Children, especially, love the tiny horses that will come to them easily and encourage petting.

Foals are born March to May, and prices, for those who wish to purchase a horse, range from \$500 to \$5,000 depending on whether they are cart trained or show quality. Since miniature horses are bred down from larger horses, they come in all colors and breeds.



Photo by Cheré Coen

Sister Angela holds Sugar Baby, a miniature horse she raises for income at her monastery in Brenham, Tx.

"Sometimes, it's a surprise what you're going to get color wise," Sister Angela said. "I guess it's kind of like people - they come in all shapes, sizes and colors."
The order also produces a wide variety of hand-painted ceramics at its Art Barn Gift Shop, some seasonal such as Halloween and Santa Claus, but most religious, such as Nativity sets and angels.

Since the order is now only two nuns, one of whom is elderly, the work of the horse farm and gift shop has fallen to Sister Angela. Interest in joining the monastery has fallen off, she said, but is starting to swing back.

"I think business is picking up again," she said. "Hopefully, we'll have new nuns out here."

If you go

The Monastery of St. Clare is open for visitors from 1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, except for January, February and September, when the grounds are only open Fridays and Saturdays. Self-guided tours of the horse farm, gift shop (which offers a peek into the back room where the ceramics are made) and the monastery chapel cost \$4 for adults, \$2 for children ages 3 to 12 and \$3 for seniors. Guided tours are given for groups of 15 or more by reservation Mondays through Fridays for \$5 per person.

Visitors may use an uncovered outdoor picnic area but cannot feed the horses. Grounds are closed to the public every Sunday and Monday and the weeks preceding Easter, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas.

For information, or to donate or volunteer, go to www.monasteryminiaturehorses.com.

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