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## Gentle steeds reach trail's end

Beloved horses promenade into retirement after years of serving special-needs children

By *BONNIE BURCH*  
Staff Writer

**FOREST HOME COMMUNITY** —The staff, volunteers and student riders at Saddle Up! said goodbye to four horses Saturday, as the "equine employees" found greener pastures elsewhere.

Nomo, Heidi, King Bee and Alyska went into retirement after years of service for the nonprofit therapeutic riding program that caters to children with special needs.

"We have a staff equine committee that evaluates where the horses are in the program. And for various reasons, these are the horses that are ready to go on to their next phase in life," Saddle Up! executive director Cheryl Scutt said.

Retiree King Bee, a 33-year-old painted pony, was named Region 5 North American Riding for the Handicapped Association's Horse of the Year in 2006. Countless children who went through the program learned to ride on the gentle horse.

"King Bee was very steady, very reliable," Scutt said. "He was our 'steady Eddy.' His girlfriend is Alyska, and we're currently in the process of trying to find a home for them together. They've become very dependent on each other. They are special sweethearts."

Nomo will go back to the person who originally donated her.

And a volunteer has already spoken for Halflinger mare Heidi.

## New 'angels' needed

Saddle Up! will replace the retirees with new horses. But not every horse is suitable for work at Saddle Up! They must go through specialized training and not be spooked by such things as wheelchairs and crutches. Above all, they should be calm, easily trainable and enjoy children's company.

"It's not just a pony ride. It takes a special horse to do the job. And we've been blessed to have so many horses donated by their owners. They are truly angels on hoof," the program's executive director said.

To send them off in style, there were no gold pocket watches during their retirement party. Instead, each retiring horse got "love buckets" filled with brushes, treats and gifts to take to their new homes.

During the cookie and punch retirement reception, students were encouraged to drop notes of gratitude and poems of love into the buckets. They also created cookies and decorated them to look like their favorite Saddle Up! horses.

More than 130 children, ranging in age from 4 to 18 years old, took about 4,400 riding lessons through Saddle Up! last year. The program is supported by 250 to 300 active volunteers.

"We've all become attached to these horses. We just want to make sure everybody had an opportunity to say goodbye," Scutt said.

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