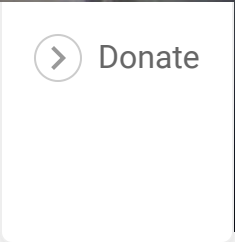
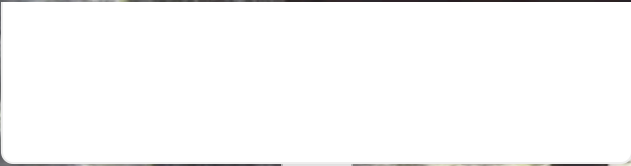
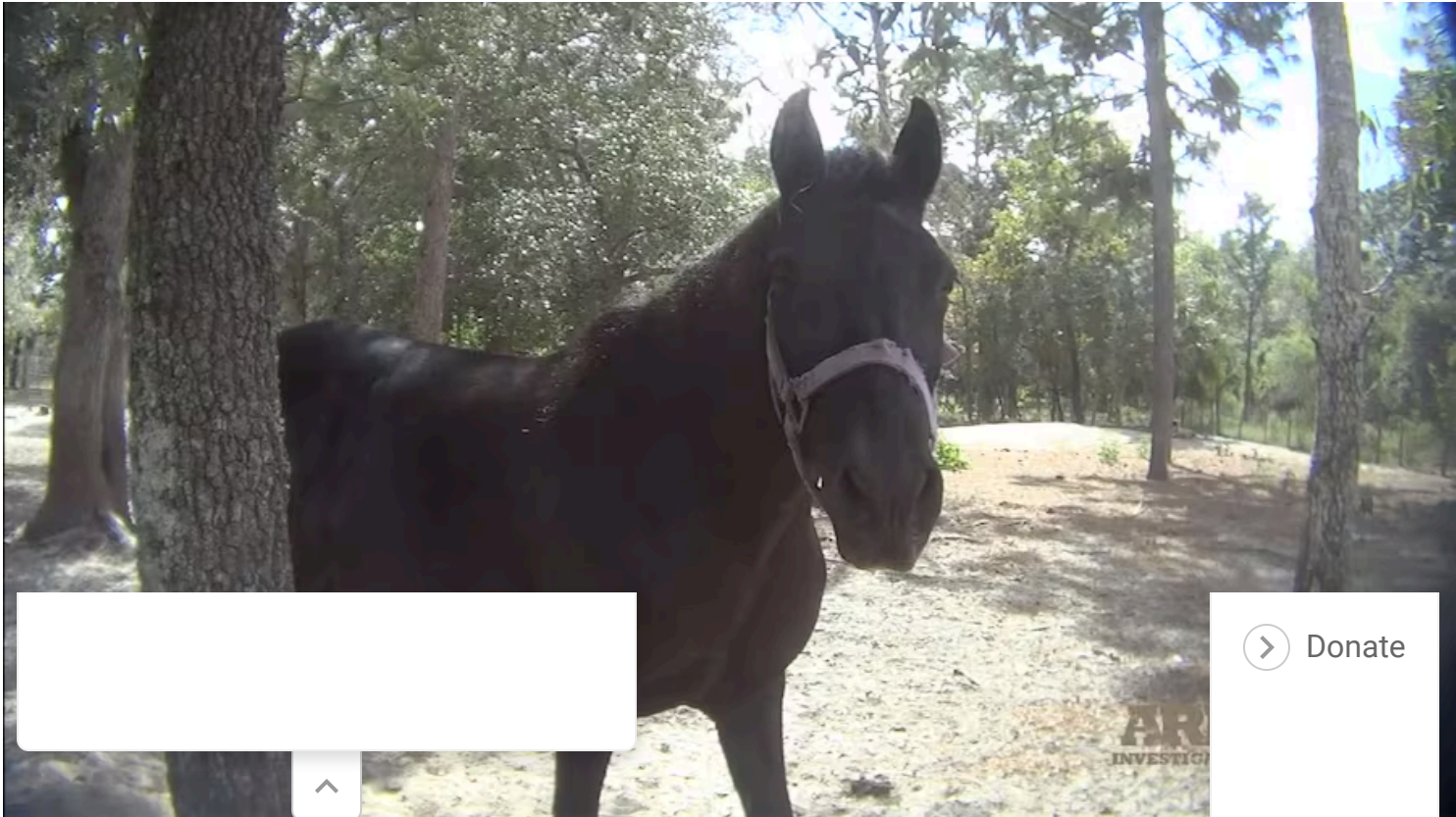


NEWS / CRIME

## Hernando sheriff slow to act against illegal horse slaughter ring, nonprofit says

In Brooksville, animal activists uncovered widespread abuse and illegal slaughter. Local law enforcement has made one arrest.



Funny Biz, a retired race horse, was illegally slain at a Brooksville slaughterhouse and sold, according to S Florida nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission. Illegally slaughtering a thoroughbred racehorse is considered a second-degree felony under Florida law and carries a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison. [ Courtesy of Animal Recovery Mission ]

By **Jack Prator** *Times staff*

to a tree. One man raised a rifle, took aim and shot it point blank in the head.

The horse, a descendant of Triple Crown winner Secretariat, didn't die immediately. It convulsed on the ground until another man finished the job. He took a butcher's knife and plunged it over and over into the animal's heart. Still clutching the bloodied blade, the man turned to Couto and a group huddled behind him, who broke into laughter.

Then they got to work chopping up the carcass with electric handsaws and bagging it for sale.


Video captured of Funny Biz's slaying is just one glimpse inside an illegal slaughterhouse at the end of a cul-de-sac in rural Brooksville, where farm animals are abused, killed and sold in unmarked bags to be distributed to food stands and butcher shops around Florida, Couto said.

A spokesperson for the Hernando County Sheriff's Office said on Wednesday that the agency is investigating the business.

But Couto, who had been undercover inside the farm for nearly two years, buying meat from the unlicensed business and earning the owners' trust, said the agency isn't acting fast enough.

In December, he shared all that he had found with the sheriff's office — hidden camera footage, illegally sold meat and recorded conversations with the business

rest at the site so far, records show. Co  
5.

Couto found  Miami Beach-based nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission in  
Since then, he said the organization has uncovered more than 200 illegal  
slaughterhouses across the state. Under Florida law, horse meat marked for  
human consumption is illegal.

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A screenshot from hidden camera footage taken by Richard Couto, founder of nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission, shows a man take aim at Funny Biz. The racehorse was illegally slaughtered and sold at a Brooksville slaughterhouse, Couto said. [ Courtesy of Animal Recovery Mission ]

He was first tipped off about the Brooksville farm by an advertisement on Craigslist selling horse meat “by the pound,” Couto said. When he and other undercover investigators licensed by the state to buy illegal meat to be used as evidence arrived to check out the slaughterhouse, Couto said they found obvious wrongdoing.

“They were walking up to pigs and beating them with two-by-fours. They were stabbing them to death. These are clear felonies in the state of Florida and everywhere in the United States,” he said.

Wearing a hidden camera, Couto documented thousands of pounds of meat loaded to be sold around the state.

“...wntown Tampa, where we’re going to a stand. Today we’re going to a small little cantina or butcher shop,” he said. “Other days they’re going to Ocala. Other days they’re going to Miami. Other days they’re going to downtown Orlando.”

Couto was shocked to find the business had operated for years without much discretion — neighbors and property owners had been complaining about the

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He said neighbors have reported “rivers of blood” seeping onto their land. Walkers and cyclists on the Suncoast Trail, which neighbors the property, have called Hernando deputies to report the abuse, according to Couto.

...they’re chopping up an animal alive and  
are yelling at [redacted] as they’re waking their children and their animals on the  
wondering [redacted] in the world is going on,” Couto said.

On July 6, Hernando deputies first made an arrest on the property, records show. Juan Alberto Hernandez Cruz, 54, was charged with animal cruelty, a misdemeanor.

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years in prison.

“The two owners were not arrested. They’re on the farm today,” Couto said. “That is unconscionable. It should be illegal.”

A spokesperson with the Hernando County Sheriff’s Office declined to comment on the case, citing an active investigation.

“You won’t understand until you read the entire report, which I can’t release right now because we’re still working with the state attorney,” said Denise Moloney, a spokesperson with the agency.

Couto said he will keep fighting to bring the animals held at the Brooksville slaughterhouse to a sanctuary owned by his nonprofit.


“I wanted a happy ending. I wanted arrests to be made and the property to be closed forever,” Couto said. “And that didn’t happen.”

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**UP NEXT:** [Tampa man charged with using jail phone to arrange fentanyl sale](#)

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