Before my trip to Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue, I didn’t know much about donkeys. I don’t think people I spoke to about my trip were very knowledgeable about donkeys either. Whenever I told someone I’d be spending my spring break volunteering at a donkey rescue, I was often met with laughter, disbelief, or concern. Comments like “Donkey rescue? What do they need rescuing from? They can protect themselves, they’re violent enough,” and, “Be careful. Donkeys don’t like people, and they kick A LOT,” made me a bit fearful of going on the trip. However, my feelings changed once I spent time at the rescue.

On our first day, we watched a documentary about the rescue, and the film’s title included the words “plight of the American donkey.” I laughed. I was skeptical that the donkey faced much of a “plight.” Thankfully though, I continued paying attention and heard some important stories that changed my mind. I learned about how donkeys have been abused and neglected by so many people over the years. I heard about the opposition the founders faced when they opened the rescue because “neglected, abandoned, and abused donkeys” weren’t seen as a very real or pressing issue. I was saddened to learn of the continuing struggle to obtain adequate funding for the rescue because the public doesn’t believe it to be a worthwhile cause to invest in.

My heart ached. Donkeys are not evil, yet they were being vilified as such by people who had spent no time around them and knew little about them. They are disliked by many and taken seriously by few. Yet, they are just innocent animals. Most people seem to forget that donkeys are living, breathing, feeling creatures just as their beloved cats and dogs are...just as we humans are. Just because donkeys are thought of as wild animals doesn’t mean they are immune to mistreatment by humans, nor does it mean they can’t contribute positively to our world.

With a new perspective and a more open mind, I was able to learn so much about donkeys in just a short time. I learned what they eat, how to pick their hooves, and how to harness and walk them. I learned a few types of basic medical treatment, including care for open wounds, sunburn, and ringworm. As a pre-veterinary student, these things are important to me and I enjoyed learning about them. However, I believe spending one-on-one time with the donkeys, getting to know their individual personalities, and learning to see past the stereotypes offered me the most important lesson of all, a universal one that can be applied to anyone in almost any context: don’t judge a book by its cover.

The donkey’s unfortunate, misguided stereotypes have contributed to its low standing in our society, as evidenced by the story of this rescue. Donkeys are seen as stubborn, stupid animals when in reality that couldn’t be further from the truth. Once they learn to trust humans, donkeys can be the most docile, affectionate creatures. They act similarly to dogs; they enjoy going on walks, being pet and brushed, eating treats, and rolling around in the grass. Some even nuzzle their heads into your hands to be pet.

This ASB trip proved to me how important it is to familiarize myself with a person or situation before making any judgments about them. Donkeys’ lives are at stake because of our tendencies to dislike and fear the unfamiliar. Thankfully though, we can work to overcome this mindset. The rescue’s workers proved to me that there is hope; there are people out there who can see past the stereotypes and work to educate the public to do the same. It’s not too late for the donkeys, and it’s not too late for
us. We can all be sources of positive change as long as we are willing to keep open minds and open hearts.