



Creating The Positives

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER | PHOTO BY CAITLIN REASON FOR DREAMSCAPE INC., 501C3

Here we are, hunkered down with mandated lockdowns while horse show date after horse show date passes us by, and in the big picture those are trivial with all the sickness and death that has escalated across the world. Uncertainty is still one of the few things that is known for sure at this point.

In times of uncertainty it can be extremely stressful, especially for those who don't have family, who don't have a close-knit support group. We, however, can count ourselves fortunate to have a great extended family in our show horse community. We are all fierce competitors in a sport which requires a healthy dose of commitment, both in finances and time, not to mention the emotional bonds that are made with our animals. That combination of elements doesn't make for a natural feel good relationship with one another, however, we are not normal. (No kidding!)

America has long been about seeing the best in people in the worst of times and that is especially true among its show horse competitors. Our extended family from across the land is creating positives where not many exist at the moment.

It started early on with individuals and families sending donations to support lesson horses, all of whom are unemployed at the moment and not bringing in vital income to training/lesson barns. Giving back to the horses that do so much was not hard to encourage because of the many big hearts in our family. In the same vein, the Joint Leadership Council, which is made up of representatives of the United Professional Horsemen's Association (UPHA), the American Saddlebred Horse Association (ASHA), the American Morgan Horse Association (AMHA), the American Hackney Horse Society (AHHS), and the American Road Horse and Pony Association (ARHPA), never thought they'd be working on something like this, but that group immediately went to work on ways to help our professional family members with financial aid during this crisis.

Starting in Wisconsin, now different state associations are also giving back to their home barns. The American Saddlebred Horse Association of Wisconsin (ASAW) board of directors met and agreed unanimously to send monetary donations to every barn that participated in an Academy class at a show in Wisconsin in 2019. Twenty checks with a letter of encouragement were mailed and now other state associations are following their lead.

Instead of bashing their associations for perceived shortcomings or arguing over what a hunter horse should look like, our family's Facebook users are now checking on one another and creating positive thoughts by posting great memories in the form of pictures and stories. Our Saddle Horse Report family has been fully engaged to do our part in this arena as well. You can feel the warmth and positivity all around.

The same barns that have been competing against one another in the show ring and competing for customers are now sending each other lunch. The pay it forward movement has literally gone viral as professionals lift one another up and say "we're thinking about you; we care about you." Businesses associated with the sport are doing their part to give back and create positive moments in so many creative ways as well. As we all ask, "When can we show again?" the question asked even more is, "How can we help?"

Answering that very question, Julie Kaufman and Andrea Steponaitis at Blue Willow Farm loaded up an American Saddlebred and a Morgan and headed to the local senior living center where they brought tears of joy to the residents and the staff. That act of kindness was picked up by Fox and Friends, which invited the duo to be on a segment of their nationally televised Sunday show. It was a win-win for positivity and our breeds.

They have since made additional trips to other facilities and plan to continue doing this with their young riders when things return to normal. And just like the other acts of kindness and positivity created by our show horse family, this practice has already been taken up by others like Mark Bodnar and Sheri Brandl at Equitate and May Chadick at Vantage Point Farm, with others sure to follow.

In this time when there is so much doom and gloom in the press – some of it rightfully so as many worry about loved ones as well as the ability to put food on the table – it is refreshing to be able to find a positive nearly every day when engaging our extended family from a safe distance. Once that distance is removed let's remember the things we did that got us through this time and not put them on a shelf until the next disaster.

Let's make positivity an everyday way of life!