

Love of horses keeps trainer going after fire

Life changing disaster | Couple realize the importance of community support, helping others and keeping insurance policies up to date

FORT MACLEOD, Alta. — Casino, Jethro, Jello, Tango, Solo and Yoyo are the welcoming committee at S.R. Horse Training. The dogs greet visitors with barks and friendly nudges in a yard that smells of fresh lumber and potted petunias.



SR Delta Force is a national champion Arabian and one of Sandy and Gord Hester's prized animals. The couple own about 35 horses and train and board several others of all breeds at S.R. Horse Training near Fort Macleod, Alberta. | Barb Glen photo

The large arena and new shelters stand where charred wreckage squatted in January after a fire obliterated most of the operation and singed some horses, sparing only the home of Sandy and Gord Hester.

Gord wondered then if they should quit the business Sandy had started in 1974. But Sandy never lost her desire to carry on.

So they rebuilt.

Insurance covered only about one-third of the \$550,000 loss. Community fundraising, help from the Arabian horse association and a mortgage Sandy says they will be paying until they're in their 80s allowed them to raise the business from the ashes.

"I've never done anything else. I've trained horses my whole life," Sandy said, as she sat in a coffee room with window views of the new 80 by 160 foot heated arena.

She and Gord, and their son Brady, 26, are grateful for the support they received after the Jan. 4 grass fire that swept land northwest of Fort Macleod.

"It made you feel just blessed," said Sandy of the help they received. "We made such good friends."

Gord said he was particularly amazed by support from the Mennonite community that helped with reconstruction.

"It gives you a real sense that there's people out there who care," he said. "Saying thank you seems pretty small compared to what they've done."

Members of the Springpoint Hutterite colony also provided labour to rebuild an ill-fated stud barn that had been hit by a tornado the year before and then was partially burned.

Friends and neighbours donated hay, dog food, tack and other supplies and friend Kerry Miller-Mitchell donated her barns and arena so the business never stopped operating, albeit from a temporary location.

Gord said the fire and its aftermath have changed his "bucket list."

"I'm glad we rebuilt because I want to give something to my son. It taught us a lot too. I've got a different outlook on life now. I have a plan that includes donating back some work somewhere in a disaster zone because I just think that's a neat thing to do."

Gord and Brady work for Volker Stevin, the firm contracted to maintain Alberta's highways in the southern region. They help with horse operations on evenings and weekends and Sandy handles the day to day operations.

All three participate in various horse shows with their prized Arabians. This year, they took a break from the show circuit, but Gord expects to go to Arizona, Oklahoma and the Dakotas next year.

At home, Sandy is pleased with the new stalls, wash racks, shelters and arena.

"This really gives us more space for more riders and for the cutting that we like to do."

The business offers horse training in English, Western, reining, working cow horse, basic start, dressage and trail riding. It also foals out mares for other owners and helps the local veterinary clinic care for horses with health problems.

The stables can accommodate about 50 animals for boarding, and the Hesters have about 35 horses of their own.

They've won numerous ribbons, titles, plaques and trophies, but the only hardware that survived the fire was the one and only national trophy for working cow horse, won by SR Delta Force in 2009.

Sandy once used the word "fire" in the names of foals sired by her stud, Setfire, but now she says she has lost her taste for anything to do with flames or sparks.

The Hesters have larger, newer facilities now, but Sandy said they came at great cost. "In three years, the (former) place would have been paid for. So it's not like a silver lining."

"What we've got now is like a dream place, but we really have to step up and keep the business going and maybe venture out, do bigger events, maybe rent to another trainer to keep the place going, because it has to pay for itself."

Gord echoed those sentiments.

"I have a little problem with being bubbly about the new place," he admitted. "I've got to get over my self pity, I guess, but it's tough. I had a whole lot of other plans once this place was paid for. It's pretty much stay at home now."

He and Sandy learned a lesson about checking insurance policies to make sure coverage is adequate and she now advises others to do the same.

"You don't think of it, that you're going to lose everything in two hours. So that was a really big lesson. Look at your policy, see what you have and update."

The wind is also strong on this sunny day, six months after Sandy and Gord stood in almost the same spot in bitter winter wind, squinting at the ash-strewn stables. This time, there are sunglasses over Sandy's eyes rather than tears within them. There is also the spark of determination.

"Loving this job keeps me going. And results. The horses, when they give back to you, I think that just makes it a reason to keep going on."