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Spotlight

Casting the Spotlight on passionate and creative Canadians and the innovative organizations that are making their mark in the nonprofit sector and helping to build a better society.

This month, the Spotlight is on . . .

Circle F Horse Rescue Society



By Susan Fish
September 27, 2010



ABBOTSFORD, BC // Any parent who has ever had a child ask for a pony knows that caring for horses is expensive, both in time and money. Imagine, then, looking after ten horses.

The [Circle F Horse Rescue Society](#) near Abbotsford, British Columbia has been doing this since 1997. What's most remarkable is Circle F is operated solely by volunteers, working in two shifts a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Looking after horses is not something that can be postponed to another day.

How this organization maintains a solid base of reliable, committed volunteers and a volunteer board of directors is a key to their success.

Clues to reliable volunteers

It takes 45 people, working in teams of two or three, to look after the horses at the Circle F rescue. Initially, **Walter Paetkau**, the president of Circle F, says it is a mystery to him how he gets committed volunteers, but he has more than a few clues.

Paetkau is the first line of inquiry when a prospective volunteer learns about the organization. Most of the volunteers are people with a horse background or individuals who wish they had the resources or time to work with horses. He relies on 11 years of working with Circle F, 32 years as the executive director of Abbotsford Community Services and a lifetime of experience as a volunteer to size up whether someone would be a good fit for the organization and to see whether that person could fit into



a needed slot. But it is Paetkau's next move that gives the first real clue to the long term reliability of volunteers, some of whom drive in weekly from as far away as Vancouver. Rather than simply slotting the volunteer into place, Paetkau approaches the existing team for that time slot and discusses the prospective volunteer with the team, listening to what they say.

Team chemistry and needs are keys to the success of the Circle F system. If a team says, "We like things the way they are," Paetkau says, "I honour what they say. I don't impose a volunteer on anybody."

The team has to work well together because they depend on one another: if one person is sick or can't make their scheduled weekly 2-hour shift, they don't contact Paetkau or the organization; they call their team. Accountability to the team depends on a good deal of what Paetkau calls "self-responsibility."

Some of the volunteers are children as young as the age



of 8, but the organization requires parents or guardians to accompany the children so other volunteers aren't distracted from their primary tasks of looking after the horses, feeding and grooming them.

Volunteers come to the organization because they care about the horses. Sometimes human bonds form too. One team regularly brings food to share with one another, potluck-style. Very few volunteers have ever quit because of loss of interest in the work, and many volunteers have been part of the organization for five, seven, or even ten years.

There is a high degree of trust involved in Circle F's system. Volunteers know that they are accountable to each other. A new volunteer pays a one-time, \$5 membership fee, which means that he, or more likely she, is a volunteer-owner, sharing in the responsibility of the program and the ownership of the horses.

There is also a positive approach to learning. Learning is done in a hands-on way, with more experienced teammates teaching newer members. Rather than correcting a way of working with horses, a team leader will suggest another way.

Using structure to create a safe place

Just as the horses learn to feel at home in the Circle F barn, so the volunteers feel secure within the structure of the organization. "People are clear about why they are here," says Paetkau. "We as an organization have to be clear and have procedures and infrastructure in place." Paetkau says this "silent infrastructure" helps volunteers sense that there is depth in what they are doing.

What does infrastructure offer to volunteers?

- A place that is theirs
- Support — At Circle F, this means there are people and procedures for intake and placements, people who are horse-experienced, people who monitor the health of the horses, a board of directors that takes care of policies, fundraising, and communications
- Integrity — Volunteers know they are valued, trusted and listened to
- Security — Volunteers know the organization is not a month to month organization, but a stable organization with a plan and a place for them
- Resources — Circle F maintains a library of articles about horses and horse care for its volunteers to use to enhance their hands-on learning

Getting to know you

Walter Paetkau visits the barn several times a week and makes sure to vary the time and dates of his visits so he can interact with different volunteers. He keeps the interactions casual so that volunteers don't feel he is looking over their shoulders, judging what they are doing. He is also deliberate about thanking the volunteers for their commitments during these conversations and wants the volunteers to sense that they have this support.

Volunteers receive regular emails from Circle F. Once or twice a month, Paetkau sends out a general information email to all volunteers, updating them on information they need to know. But more so, they receive regular emails from board members, who are responsible for horse health and care, when there is information that needs to be communicated.

While friendships form naturally between team members, the organization also holds two annual events to show appreciation for its volunteers — a spring annual meeting/celebration potluck and a summer barbecue. At the same time, the organization recognizes that the volunteers are not there primarily for social purposes but to be with horses and to work with their team. They want the volunteers to feel appreciated but don't focus on all the volunteers getting to know one another.

Board members shovel manure

Everyone who sits on the board of directors at Circle F is a hands-on volunteer. In addition to mucking out the barn, each board member heads up a team that supports the volunteers — a horse exercise and conditioning team, a health team, website management, fundraising, etc. The health team, for instance, identifies health issues in the horses, works with vets and communicates to the volunteers what they need to do to help the horses. Board members see each other regularly on site and sometimes hold meetings by email.

Paying for horseshoes, hay, and vets

Circle F is able to cover the cost of their leased facilities by subletting one of the barns on the property (to an auto-body shop) and the house (to a volunteer). All the labour in caring for the horses is volunteer-based. But still, horses are expensive to

A snapshot of...

Who: Circle F Horse Rescue Society

Mandate/Mission: To care for horses, old or young, that have been abused or neglected; to provide an alternative to euthanasia or slaughter to provide a home

maintain — with the cost of purchasing and storing hay, vet, and farrier bills as well as supplements and fuel costs.

As with all small community organizations, fundraising is an ongoing challenge, especially during times when government support is being cut back. Over the last two years, provincial grants to Circle F were eliminated, reducing the modest operating surplus they had maintained.

Circle F receives fees for adoption when a horse finds a new home. Funds are raised through donations, garage sales, special events and gifts in-kind such as pasture, hay, tack, and professional services. They make use of the Internet in their fundraising — their website has a link to [Canada Helps](#) and a newsletter. An annual fundraising letter is sent, primarily to volunteers and ongoing donors. They also make opportunities available for people to sponsor horses per month.

A challenge for Circle F is expanding their donor base beyond the people who have a natural connection with the organization. Any time they run an event, they rely on their horse care volunteers to help make it successful and wish they were more successful in drawing in volunteers whose only task was fund development.

They are trying out new fundraising events — such as a poker ride and walk — and lowering costs where they can, such as by sending newsletters by email. Paetkau is also careful to cultivate relationships with ongoing donors, sending personal thank you cards and respecting their wishes about their donations.

F is for freedom

The founder of the Circle F program believed that horses should have freedom from neglect and abuse, and freedom to have a good home. Walter Paetkau, who was raised on a farm in Alberta and was glad to get back to working with horses after 50 years, has also found a home at Circle F which is creating a place for volunteers as well as horses.

"There's no magic formula," says Paetkau. "But working with volunteers is more of an art than people realize."



[Susan Fish](#) is a writer and editor living in Waterloo, Ontario. She has extensive experience in the nonprofit sector and loves a good story.

Have you — or your organization — experienced a stunning success or spectacular failure? How are you creatively and innovatively making your mark? These are the stories we want to capture. Help make the nonprofit sector stronger by sharing your story and the valuable lessons you learned along the way. Email us today at editor@charityvillage.com.

auction or slaughter; to provide a home for horses that no longer fit in with the owner's plan; when ready, to place the horses in screened, loving adoptive homes; and to involve and educate volunteers in the care, maintenance and handling of the horses.

Location: Abbotsford, BC

When established: 1997

Number of staff: No paid staff

Number of volunteers: 45

Budget: \$45,000 - \$48,000



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