

## Giving Thanks in Tough Times

2011 has been a very tough year on many levels. Across the nation, lost homes, jobs, and savings, have left lives destabilized, with little to fall back on. Floods in the Northeast, tornadoes in Missouri, and fires in Texas have taken lives, destroyed homes, and damaged many of the places we love, beyond recognition. The severest drought since the

1950's has taken its toll across much of Texas where we live, and has left many of us exhausted, struggling to save crops and plants, and to care for our animals. If you haven't been personally affected by one or more of these circumstances, then you most likely know someone who has.

In such times of such hardship and loss, one might think we'd find little to be grateful for. But as I look around, I see expressions of gratitude in many directions.

When the smoke settled after the fires east of Austin in early September, 1,600 homes had been lost, including that of State Parks Director, Brent Leisure, and many of those who had fought the fires. When Mr. Leisure sent out an email on September 16, to report on the outcome of the fires, he emphasized not the loss of his home, nor the memories or keepsakes that it once held, but rather the gratitude and pride that he felt for the State Park division staff, Wildlife division staff, and volunteers whose courage, professional preparedness, and tireless work had helped to save the Civilian Conservation Corps buildings of Bastrop State Park. He wrote that these historic structures, built during the depression, under a public works project, in the early 1930's, are an irreplaceable cultural resource. He then adds, "And more important than all of these great accomplishments, our staff that worked the incident and those colleagues that live in the community can celebrate that they and their families are safe and unharmed." Thankfulness-square in the face of great personal loss.

The September wildfires brought out the best in people from near and far, as many acted imme-

diately to provide transportation, holding facilities, and feed and supplies for endangered horses. (See the articles by Kelly Kaminski and Lee Ann Johnson in last month's Horseback Magazine.) The gratitude of those who were helped will last throughout their lifetimes. Knowing that so many people did the right thing, for the right, (unselfish), reasons, gives me hope for humanity, and for that, I am grateful.

As for me, and many I know, this year has been repeatedly punctuated by the type of loss we all dread the most- the departing of a loved one from our lives. Each week, it seemed, one of us lost a parent, spouse, dear friend, or beloved horse or other animal companion. It has certainly not been my favorite chapter in life, but within it, I have discovered feelings of profound gratitude and connection to others.

When my father passed away, people came forward from near and far to offer comfort and to celebrate his life. As they shared their stories- some of which I hadn't heard before, they recounted his long career as Bandera County's Agricultural Extension Agent, and his related work in developing a thriving 4-H program here. "Your father found me at school, and asked permission for me to leave class briefly, just so he could tell me how to treat my diseased peach trees"... "My family couldn't afford to raise lambs, so your father just showed up one day with chickens, so we could have a 4-H livestock project"... "When I didn't show up on time to depart for a livestock judging team trip, your father drove to my house to find me, even though I wasn't a key member of his top

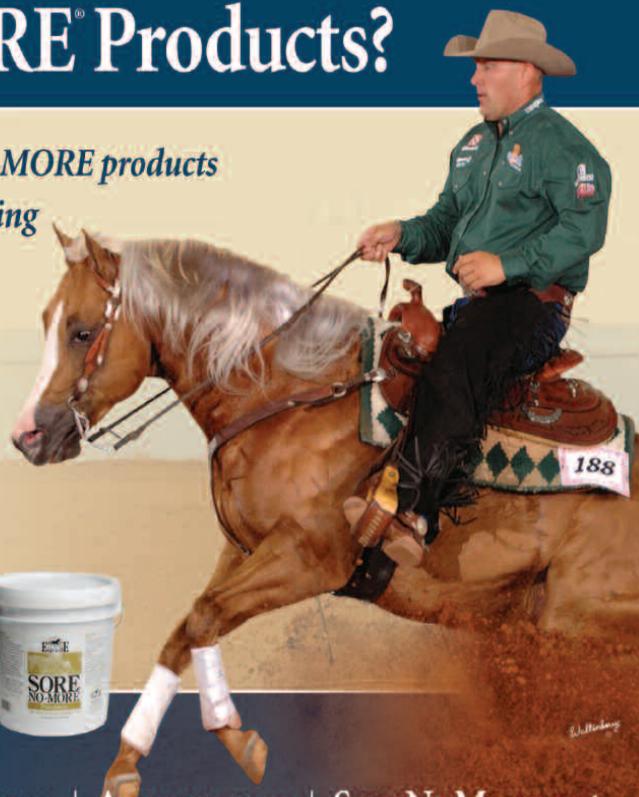
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team"...Or simply, "Your father cared about me, when no one else thought I mattered that much." While I knew my father had made a difference in many people's lives, it still amazed me that, after so many years, so many people took the time to return, and to share their love and remembrance of him with my family and with each other. We were sad, but we were not alone, and I felt connected to these people in a way that I had never experienced before. For this, I will be forever grateful.

In the weeks and months that followed, many of my friends and acquaintances from the years when I was growing up in Bandera suffered similar losses to my own. When we spoke to one another about the loved ones we had lost, our conclusion was always the same- "We were lucky, so lucky to have had them..." The same has been true for my friends who have lost beloved horses or pets. Even through our sadness, we can't help but feel grateful to have had them in our lives.

I know that I am fortunate to live in a beautiful place, and to be involved in an endeavor that connects horses, nature, and people, in a way of life that fits me to a "t". I have incredible family and friends, and, (typically!), wonderful, appreciative guests, without whom, I could not be here. I have a talented, handsome, (if I do say so!), husband, to work with me, and to share in this experience. (That's right, Peter and I got married on July 1st!). I have lovely, willing horses that I get to interact with almost every day. And, each month, I get to write about anything I want to, for a beautiful, informative magazine, and for the finest people in the horse-related publication business. (Thank you, Steve and Vicki.). I take none of this for granted.

For those of you still struggling, every day, with many difficult circumstances and issues, I hope my words have offered some hope and comfort as you continue to negotiate the oft-troubled waters of life.

When life gets to be too much, find a horse. Climb astride, close your eyes, then open them, take a deep breath, and Remember to Enjoy the ride.

Happy Thanksgiving, and beyond.

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