



## SMOOTHING THE WAY

BLUE GRASS FARMS CHARITIES OFFERS A LEG UP TO  
THOROUGHBRED FARM WORKERS

By William Bowden / Photos by Matt Barton

---

Leaving family and friends behind in their native Hidalgo, Mexico, to come to Kentucky and begin a new life together wasn't an easy decision for Yuliana Ramirez Estrada and her husband, Juan Estrada Hernandez. Eight years later the move has paid off for the couple and their children.

Juan now works at Spendthrift Farm as a stallion groom in the breeding operation while Yuliana stays busy providing a home for her husband and their two school-age daughters. They are typical of the many families who derive their living through employment on Central Kentucky Thoroughbred farms. They also exemplify the hard-working people in this industry who occasionally need a helping hand.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLUE GRASS FARMS CHARITIES



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLUE GRASS FARMS CHARITIES

Opposite, Yuliana Ramirez Estrada, daughters Yarely and Briana, and husband Juan Estrada Hernandez have benefited from BGFC as has a young camper, top. Above, the Racino event (live auction shown) is a major fundraiser for the organization.

Blue Grass Farms Charities exists for just that purpose. From coordinating health care referrals to providing food and clothing assistance and many other services, the privately funded BGFC strives to help these workers and families prosper and make them feel appreciated.

Juan and Yuliana have felt the compassionate touch of BGFC through medical referrals for Yuliana's father, who was seriously injured while working on a horse farm, and for several minor injuries Juan has sustained. Supplemental rent and utilities support and new school backpacks for Yarely, 6, and Briana, 8,

have also been provided.

"Blue Grass Farms Charities came to help us in our time of need," Yuliana said, speaking through a translator. "This is the best thing to happen to us because we are alone in this country."

### Helping to improve lives

Blue Grass Farms Charities was founded in 2003 as a complement to the chaplaincy at Keeneland, which was already providing support to backstretch workers. (See sidebar on page 94) The nonprofit corporation is dedicated to extending health and human services to Thoroughbred farm workers and their families.

"The average Lexingtonian may think of the horse industry only in terms of glamorous racing meets and the picturesque beauty of the big, sprawling farms, but there is a huge population of people working on those farms who are the engine pushing it all along," said Wade Haga, outreach director for BGFC. "We want to improve their lives as much as we can."

Farm workers perform many tasks, including those involving direct contact with the horse such as grooms or hot walkers. They may also support the general maintenance and upkeep of the property as stable hands, mowers, or painters.

Tom Thornbury, associate director of sales operations at Keeneland, is a founding board member of BGFC. He points to the challenges farm workers may face in making ends meet and how the charity steps in to help.

"The typical entry-level job on a farm does not leave a lot of extra money for expensive health care and other demands on their income," he said. "Anytime we can

make something available for workers and their families, we are happy to do it. It's a humanitarian outreach program."

### Necessities and then some

BGFC helps farm workers with both the sustenance and spirit of their lives. Programs in health care, food, clothing, and financial assistance allow them to meet the basic challenges of everyday life. Annual events provide the fun side, bringing farm workers and their families together to enjoy a sense of camaraderie and a shared work ethic.

Health care initiatives include referrals to University of Kentucky HealthCare and guidance in seeking financial assistance there. A joint effort with the Bluegrass Community Health Center brings outreach clinics to the farms. BGFC intercedes in emergency situations as well as ongoing general health concerns.

The BGFC food program is a cooperative effort with GleanKY, a charitable group that gathers and redistributes excess fresh fruits and vegetables from area grocery stores, farms, orchards, and farmers' markets. BGFC receives from a few hundred up

to 1,000 pounds of produce weekly and redirects it to the farms. The charity also maintains a small pantry at its office.

The food initiative is especially helpful to Tiffany Easley, a single mom who works with mares and foals for Godolphin at Gainsborough Farm and has four children to feed.

"I like that I can come and draw from the pantry from time to time," she said. "They have also helped me when I get behind with my bills, and with Kroger gift cards and school supplies for my kids."



Wade Haga, BGFC's outreach director: "We want to improve their lives as much as we can."

On the educational front, families like Easley's with school-age children can take advantage of the annual Back-to-School Backpacks Giveaway, which distributed 346 backpacks with school supplies this past summer, up from 190 in 2015.

"This was our second year participating in the backpack program," said Kim Poulin, assistant sales manager at Mill Ridge Farm, who requested 30 backpacks. "When these children arrive to pick up their school supplies, it's like you have given them one of the best presents ever. The smiles and laughter say it all."

Each summer BGFC sponsors up to 25 farm workers' children to attend Camp Curiosity, which is put on by The Lexington School. The charity also coordinates English as a Second Language courses.

### A holiday extravaganza

When it comes to having fun, the annual Festival of Christmas is one of BGFC's most popular and appreciated events. Held at Keeneland's Thoroughbred Training Center on Paris Pike, this festive two-day gala hosted more than 900 people in 2015, including 477 children.



The annual Back-to-School Backpacks Giveaway benefits school-age children.

## KEENELAND CHAPLAINCY SUPPORTS BACKSTRETCH WORKERS

Diana Varon likes to say she's "behind everybody" when it comes to fulfilling her duties as services coordinator in Keeneland's chaplaincy office.

Instead of sitting at her desk waiting for backstretch workers to come to her, she walks through the barns looking for problems. If a track worker feels someone is "at their back" in a good way, that's probably Varon.

"Backstretch workers don't have any direct connection with the chaplaincy office," the Colombian native said. "So we go to the barns and ask everyone what they need."

Dean Carpenter, Keeneland's chaplain, says his office provides services for the entire grounds. In addition to grooms and hot walkers, that can include horse van drivers, ticket window and starting gate workers, even trainers and owners.

"I help with any need from any area," Carpenter said. "Whether that

be a medical problem, a spiritual need, counseling, or helping with children starting school, we're here to assist."

Varon helps workers obtain a track license and file income tax returns. "I do these things because this is America," she said. "These are the things they need to do here, to do better in life."

Harold Sam is a groom who comes to Keeneland from Louisiana for the sales sessions and the fall and spring racing meets. He noticed vision problems several years ago, and Varon helped him get glasses.

"Diana gave me the information I needed for the glasses and helped me when I had a bad tooth and a shoulder problem," he said. "That made me feel good."



From left, Sam Gilman, Harold Sam, Diana Varon, and Keeneland chaplain Dean Carpenter

Sam Gilman, a hot walker, has worked year-round at Keeneland for nine years. He has had similar ailments to Sam's that the chaplain's office has helped him with.

"They have treated me real well here," he said. "If I need something, Dean and Diana have both been great. It makes you feel good, that someone cares about you a little bit."



Each child received a gift bag with two toys, books, hats and gloves, and a treat bag. Families were given a bag of fresh oranges, soup mixes, boxed macaroni and cheese, and a \$20 Kroger gift card. The Lafayette High School orchestra performed holiday music, and a volunteer presented a puppet show.

At Thanksgiving, BGFC partners with BHG (Bluegrass Hospitality Group) to sign up farm workers' families for participation in the restaurant company's community-wide program of holiday meals.

Another BGFC-sponsored event that workers look forward to is the annual Thoroughbred Farm Soccer Tournament and picnic, with teams consisting of farm workers.

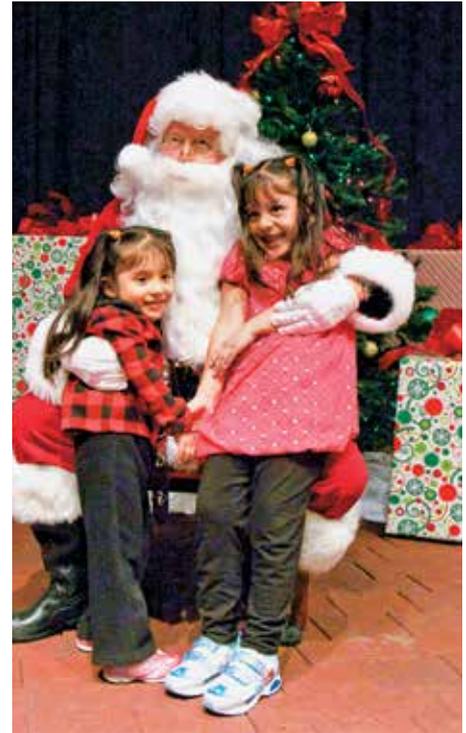
"This tournament is both a fundraiser and benefit," Haga said. "It's a great community builder in the industry. We have 15 farms that put a team in the tournament. The families come out, and there are food trucks. It's fun for workers to see each other in an environment outside of their jobs."

Blue Grass Farms Charities draws its financial support from special events, foundation and corporate grants, Thoroughbred



farms, and individual donors. Its major annual fundraising event is Racino, held at the Keeneland Entertainment Center with Keeneland as the presenting sponsor. It features an audience of Thoroughbred industry insiders and an exciting evening of casino-style gaming, live and silent auctions, music, famous guests, and excellent food.

Haga made special note of the participation of the farms themselves in contributing to BGFC. "We love the idea of the Thoroughbred industry supporting its own," he said. "We're thankful that there are generous people who understand the need we serve and are willing to help."



Clockwise from left, at the annual Festival of Christmas hundreds of children receive gifts, meet Santa Claus, and enjoy food and festivities.

Thoroughbred Charities of America provides a major grant, as does the Keeneland Foundation. Thornbury said Keeneland's contribution to BGFC is typical of the track's philanthropic mission that began with establishment of its guiding principles in 1935.

"Keeneland is a unique entity," he said, "in that it is a tax-paying, for-profit corporation that is structured like a nonprofit and gives away millions of dollars each year to charitable causes and educational research through its foundation. It's been that way since the beginning."

### Betting on winners

All of this far-reaching effort ultimately goes to making life a little better for an army of Thoroughbred farm workers and their families who do much of the behind-

THANK YOU FOR VOTING US ONE OF THE  
BEST BAKERIES 7 YEARS RUNNING

## Come and See What's New for Breakfast and Lunch!

Kentucky Proud  
Products

Coffee from  
Lexington Coffee & Tea

All Natural Farm Fresh  
Eggs from  
Northfork Farms



Family owned since 1956

726 E. Main Street  
859-255-9481

[www.MageesBakery.com](http://www.MageesBakery.com)



## making a difference

BLUE GRASS FARMS CHARITIES

the-scenes work to keep the industry operating. Those in the know say this is time and resources well spent.

"The people who own the horses and the farms and those of us who work on the farms as veterinarians depend on these people, who do an amazing job across the board," said Dr. Tom Riddle, a founding board member of BGFC and co-founder of Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital. "They are very dedicated, work long hours, and take great care of the horses."

Riddle has special reason to be appreciative of their expertise. "They are very skilled at controlling the horse in such a manner that it helps protect us as veterinarians or farriers or whoever is working on the horse," he said.

The efforts of BGFC not only are improving the everyday lives of people like Yuliana and Juan and their daughters with tangible benefits, but are also help-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLUE GRASS FARMS CHARITIES

Every summer 25 children have the chance to participate in Camp Curiosity.

ing to make this family and others feel a welcome part of the Central Kentucky community.

"We feel very happy, very comfortable to be here because this is something new for my family," Yuliana said. "We have more opportunities here for our kids. Part of my heart is still in Mexico, but Lexington has become our second home. From the bottom of my heart, I am very thankful." KM



Wade Haga and the recipients of the Back-to-School Backpacks Giveaway share a happy moment.