



KEENELAND CHAPLAINCY

The hundreds of hard-working men and women who care for racehorses at Keeneland and The Thoroughbred Center on Paris Pike have no better friends than Chaplain Dean Carpenter, Diana Varon, and Paula Brock of the Keeneland chaplaincy. The trio works tirelessly to assist members of this tight-knit community — many of whom speak little or no English and are on their own far from home — with obtaining medical care, food, clothing, and other assistance to improve their lives and help them navigate the outside world.

“Somebody tells someone else, ‘The chaplaincy helped me; it can help you.’ Word gets out,” Carpenter said. “We earn that trust because people know we’re here to help.”

Keeneland’s chaplaincy, which includes a “learning center” for activities and a clothing room and food pantry that Brock manages, is located in the dormitory in the stable area. Events during the year include a health fair in the spring and a Thanksgiving dinner in the track kitchen. The chaplaincy also has a network of area churches, benevolent agencies, and other orga-

From left, Diana Varon, Chaplain Dean Carpenter, and Paula Brock

nizations that provide assistance.

Carpenter, who also is the pastor of churches in Danville and Washington County when Keeneland is not racing, has been Keeneland’s chaplain almost four years in his second stint at the track. He worked for the maintenance department, specializing in HVAC and plumbing, for about 3½ years before leaving for a job with the city of Lexington. During that time he also was finishing ministry studies, so when Bobby Aldridge retired as Keeneland chaplain a few months later, Carpenter returned to Keeneland in a new role.

Varon, who is from Colombia, has been at Keeneland almost six years. She also works for the Kentucky Racing Health and Welfare Fund, which provides benevolent funding for medical and funeral expenses to eligible

employees in the Thoroughbred industry. During Keeneland sales she translates for Spanish-speaking clients.

“I can’t tell you how much she means to what goes on here,” Carpenter said about Varon. “People refer to her as ‘Mom’ because she takes care of them.”

Walking through the stable area and getting to know grooms, hot walkers, exercise riders, and others are important parts of what Carpenter and Varon do, and they give a morning devotional over the PA system — Carpenter in English and Varon in Spanish. Carpenter also leads a nondenominational service in the grandstand on Sunday mornings and delivers a short devotional and prayer in the jockeys quarters each day before the first race in April and October.

“They really appreciate that,” Carpenter said. “There’s so much commotion going on in there, and as soon as I open the Bible and say, ‘Let’s stop for just a minute,’ it gets quiet. Pretty awesome.”

Pretty awesome also can describe the Keeneland chaplaincy.

“The presence of a chaplain is a ministry by itself because everybody knows there’s somebody here for them at all times,” Carpenter said. “We’re a voice for the people on the backside of the track who may not always think they have a voice.” **KM**

BY ZI KEENELEND