

Fort Macleod horse training facility wiped out by fire

BY SUSAN QUINLAN
FORT MACLEOD

January 4 will be indelibly etched in the minds of the Hester family, as a perfect storm of disastrous conditions led to the incineration of their family business.

Those conditions included hurricane force winds and a dry-as-tinder landscape, combined with hot embers from someone else's stove. As a result, S.R. Horse Training of Fort Macleod was levelled, but the Hesters are now trying to rebuild, slowly, but surely.

"You didn't think it was real. The whole time we were emptying stuff from the barn, I didn't think it could happen. The feeling ... part of me wasn't scared, because I was focussed on getting the horses out. Then I went to the house, but when flames started coming at the house I realized, this all might be gone.

"I got in the car and thought it wasn't running, but it was. I guess I panicked. The smoke was so strong, you couldn't see," said Sandy.

Adding to that sense of panic, Sandy's husband, Gordon, hadn't taken his phone to work with him that day, so she couldn't contact him. She later learned he had returned to their home when he heard about the wildfire.

"He was driving a loader and saved the house. He had to make the choice ... initially he was going between the barn and the house; he chose to save the house.

"We lost our barn, office, lunchroom, deep freeze, ... pictures from horse showing, registration papers, my son's first pair of cowboy boots that had been bronzed ... It's sad to think someone else is going to cost us for the rest of our lives.

"That day there were wind warnings and a fire ban both, and we were right in the middle of it. We'll never recover ..."

Gratefully, Hester said the family's 55 horses were safely taken off the site along with their seven dogs.

"We have a quarter section and it basically burned the whole pasture, corrals and outside fences, and what fire didn't get was taken down by graders. We live on a gravel base, so the bit of soil and pasture we had there is gone.

"The clean-up was good, very very expensive, but they did a great job. There isn't a scrap of metal anywhere."

Initially the area looked like a Hollywood war movie set, with crumpled metal and burned and collapsed structures all over the spread, said Sandy, but such is no longer the case.

Although the Hesters had good house insurance, such was not the case on their training facility she added.

"There's our big mistake; we never had a clue ... As the operation grew, the policy didn't."

Meanwhile though, friends in and around Fort Macleod have been very supportive, said Sandy. Some of their horses are being kept at a neighbour's while the rest have been farmed out to other friends.

In addition, Sandy said the family's Jack Russell terriers and burmese mountain dogs, along with their 14 newly-born pups, are safe and being cared for.

These days, Sandy said she's splitting her time between training horses at her neighbour's arena, tending to all the puppies and attempting to get her insurance claims processed. Anxious to get back into their home, Sandy said she as well checks on progress with the de-smoking operation.

"The fire burned the siding, the skirting, a shed and some of the roof. They've got ozone machines inside now trying to de-smoke it, but outside, when it was wet, the smell is hard to take.

"The community has been so supportive, phoning and asking how they can help, bringing food for us and the dogs as well."

It's the "larger stuff" that's taking time, said Hester, referring to replacement of

lost structures.

"They (the bank and insurance company) have time, but we don't."

Hester started training horses at the age of 14; she's now 53.

"It's the only job I've ever done. We've been in Macleod over 30 years."

In addition to Gordon, Sandy and their son, Brady, the Hesters have a couple of staff, Vicky and Goldence, who have worked with them at S.R. Horse Training for the past five years.

"They're hoping and waiting for the new place to get built. They're there for the love of the horses. That's what keeps us going and hoping.

"We hope by fall to have something up and running if they can start building within a month."

The biggest concern right now though, said Sandy, is getting fencing up, so they can bring the horses home.

"We're going to have to buy hay to feed them for at least a year."

At S.R. Training, Hester works with Arabian and quarter horses along with Arab crosses.

"We train all breeds. We're versatile and will train any breed that comes, but my passion is the Arabs and the Arab crosses. We breed, train and show; that's what we do."

The Hesters have customers from all over the United States and throughout western Canada.

Although at this time of year the Hesters have headed south for the



Photos submitted

(Above): The S.R. Training facility in Fort Macleod before the fire that levelled the horse training operation on Jan. 4. Gordon and Sandy Hester, owners of S.R. Training, are currently working on filing insurance claims and caring for their many animals, most of whom have been billeted out to friends and neighbours. The Hesters send out heartfelt thanks to all their friends and neighbours for their kindness and generosity, and as well to the Arabian Horsemen's Distress Fund for their generous assistance as well.

annual Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show in Scottsdale, Arizona, they won't be attending this year.

"It'll be the first time we miss in 15 years. There'll be 2,700 horses there ... it's like a family.

"We're lucky we're all alive, the horses and the family. At least we're all together and we're safe."

An account has been set up at the Fort Macleod CIBC for Sandy and Gordon Hester.

If you would like to donate, but don't live in the immediate Fort Macleod area, first phone the Fort Macleod CIBC branch at 403-553-3334 and they will assist you, so a donation can be made on the Hester's behalf at the CIBC in your community.



The fire devastated the training facility, leaving charred remains behind.

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