

First White Horse Award Winner is Hero to Many



From Left to Right: Charlie McKay (Runner-Up), Dr. Enrique Torres (RTCA Executive Director), Caton Bredar (Co-Host), Pat A. Day (RTCA Industry Representative), Don K. Dean (RTCA President), Fred Lewis (Finalist), Leigh Gray (White Horse Award Winner), Mark Victor Hanson (Co-Author of *Chicken Soup for the Horse-Lovers Soul*), Gary Seidler (Co-Founder of *Health Communications Inc.*), Kenny Troutt (White Horse Award Founder & Co-owner of WinStar Farm), Mike McBride (Finalist), Ed Donnally (RTCA Director of Development)

Leigh Gray, a Southern California veterinary technician, posted a narrow victory over Woodbine Racetrack groom and exercise rider Charlie McKay and also outpolled three other finalists in the voting to win the Race Track Chaplaincy of America's first White Horse Award. McKay had rescued at least six horses during the Woodbine Racetrack barn fire in August, 2002.

Presented Thursday, October 23rd at Santa Anita Park during the White Horse Heroes Luncheon, Gray was judged to be the one backstretch or racing farm worker who performed the most heroic act in behalf of human or horse. She received a free trip to the Breeders' Cup World Thoroughbred Championships, a limited edition white bronze White Horse Statue, other gifts, and a check for \$5,000.

"Every one of the nominees is deserving of this award, because they're all heroes," said Gray after WinStar Farm co-owner, Kenny Troutt presented the trophy to her before a crowd of nearly 200. "It was an honor to be nominated to something I love to do, let alone win it. I'm touched to have been selected." Despite recurring health problems, Gray is a hero to jockeys, ill children and several score thoroughbreds.

She was working as the foot person on the horse drawn carriage that takes the patrol judges to their trackside stands at Santa Anita Park when fireworks caused the four horses to bolt. The driver was thrown from the carriage and it headed full speed towards a starting gate filled with horses. Gray coolly stopped the runaway horses, avoiding what could have been a disaster.

Gray, 40, has undergone eight cancer related surgeries since she was a child and several years ago her health forced her to give up exercising horses for the late Charlie Whittingham. While working for the Southern California Equine Foundation, she asked her bosses to perform pro-bono surgeries on severely injured thoroughbreds. They agreed with the stipulation that she perform the aftercare and find them good homes. To date she has placed 112 thoroughbreds, virtually all of whom she nursed back to health on the seven acre Thoroughbred Rehab Center she and her husband, Pete, own in Chino, California. She estimates that half would have been euthanized or eventually sold for human consumption.

Gray's method is vastly unlike other horse rescue charities that often buy thoroughbreds after they have been passed through several owners and end up in "killer" pens awaiting shipment to slaughter houses. Once in the pens, too much time has usually passed to successfully treat horses injured on the track. So once rescued, their use is limited. Gray has the surgeries done immediately after the injury, enabling the horse to heal properly. Many later become performance horses, including hunters and jumpers.

"The best way to save a horse's life is to preserve its value," she said. "(Thoroughbred) trainers know I am available and that I will take the injured horse immediately. Because I operate at the track, I can stop those horses from even starting down the road to killer pens."

Among those she has saved is Seria, a gelding so badly injured veterinarians inserted over a dozen screws in a damaged leg, all for free. He is now a novice level jumper. Several years ago, noted Southern California horse owner, Trudy McCaffery, gave her Attitude Approved who had suffered a bowed tendon. Today, the 11-year-old gelding is conditioned by noted equestrian trainer Jill Watson and has competed successfully in several three-day events. He recently qualified to try out for the upcoming Pan American Games and if successful, will likely go on to compete in this summer's Olympics in Athens.

Gray also finds appropriate homes for racehorses too unsound to become performance horses. "She knows how to match horses with the right owners," said McCaffery. "She places horses appropriately and she always follows-up."

Gray also rescued two inner-city dogs, Abby and Janie, who she takes to visit patients, including terminally ill children, in local hospitals as part of the Pet Assisted Therapy program.

She and four finalists earned free trips to the Breeders' Cup races courtesy of the Daily Racing Form. The publishers of *Chicken Soup for the Horse Lovers' Soul* provided \$1,000 to each finalist. The finalists and winner are selected in balloting by members of the White Horse Fellowship, a group of racing leaders who donate \$10,000 for each of two years.

Gray said she will place the large white bronze in her living room and use the \$5,000 prize to build a hay barn to store the feed she provides recuperating horses.

"I can't save them all, but I can help a few," she said. "If what I've done proves anything, it is that racehorses can compete successfully in another life after a serious injury."

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