

Thoroughbred Charities of America has stepped up to play a leading role in emergency relief for racehorses and the people who care for them

To the Rescue

Erin Harty

It's like Clark Kent turning into Superman.

How else could you describe a venerable charity organization best-known for its grant-making in support of aftercare initiatives and health and human services for backstretch and farm workers charging forth into the breach to assist racehorses abandoned in fields and stalls in Kentucky or stranded on an island 1,700 miles away?

Since its founding in 1990, Thoroughbred Charities of America (TCA) has distributed over \$23 million to more than 200 charitable organizations that fall into one of four categories:

1. Providing assistance to backstretch and farm employees;
2. Supporting the retirement, retraining and rehoming of racehorses;
3. Funding equine research that benefits Thoroughbreds; or
4. Utilizing Thoroughbreds in equine-assisted therapy programs.

It's also been the title sponsor of the Retired Racehorse Project's Thoroughbred Makeover since 2013.

TCA distributes funds through a stringent grant application and review process. But no part of that process could have prepared executive director Erin Crady for the tumultuous chain of events that found her lying awake in bed at 4 a.m. one day last fall, refreshing a flight-tracking app on her smartphone and bursting into tears when a cargo plane full of feed and supplies finally took off for Puerto Rico.

It's a new role for TCA, one the organization fell into serendipitously but is uniquely equipped to fulfill. And after a baptism by fire dealing with multiple worst-of-their-kind catastrophes in 2017, TCA's leaders are looking down the road and hoping to be a reliable source of future emergency assistance for Thoroughbreds in harm's way.

COURTESY SHELLEY BLODGETT





A racehorse awaits food and water after surviving Hurricanes Irma and Maria's direct hits on Puerto Rico.

A Fund Is Born

In the summer of 2016, the Thoroughbred industry was shocked to discover that 43 horses under the care of trainer Maria Borell and her father, Charles, had been abandoned on a farm in Mercer County, Kentucky.

TCA is headquartered about an hour away in Lexington, so Crady thought it was only natural that they should step in to help. She received permission from the organization's board to use a small discretionary fund to purchase a load of hay, and then drove out to the farm to meet the hay guy with a check. TCA was one of many organizations offering emergency assistance with feed and veterinary care for the horses, mostly Thoroughbreds.

Soon after, Crady received a call from Jaime Roth, a member of TCA's board of

directors. Roth, along with her parents, Larry and Nanci, owns LNJ Foxwoods racing stable, which has been the top sponsor of TCA's stallion season auction for the past several years. The entire family is dedicated to animal welfare, says Crady, especially Thoroughbred welfare.

Roth told Crady that her family wanted to do something more for the Mercer County horses. "So I thought maybe we get another load of hay," Crady recalls but, as it turns out, Roth and her parents wanted to start a fund with TCA to assist with the horses' care and rehabilitation. The offer was as surprising as it was generous.

"Being a nonprofit, things like this don't happen every day," says Crady. "So we were quite excited and grateful."

It was a bright spot of hope to come out of the horrific Mercer County case, and would allow TCA to mount a quicker, more nimble response for other large rescue events or emergencies.

The Roth family provided the initial contribution for the Horses First Fund, and other donors provided additional funds. The Horses First Fund spent about \$25,000 on the Mercer County rescue. Afterward the fund remained, waiting for a future need. "It became something that we were able to access when horses were in need of emergency aid," Crady says.

Then came 2017, a year seemingly consumed by nonstop calamity: multiple major hurricanes, floods and wildfires, all having significant impacts on local horse communities.

Two of these natural disasters — Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the Lilac Fire in Southern California — also impacted the local racing communities. You probably recall the heartbreaking videos shared on social media.

These were exactly the types of scenarios the Horses First Fund was created to address.

Lessons Learned From 2017's Disasters

It's hard to recall another year in which such a large portion of the Thoroughbred industry came face-to-face with such devastating natural disasters. The waters have receded, the embers have cooled and the rebuilding has begun, but another hurricane and wildfire season is on the horizon. What can the Thoroughbred industry learn from the catastrophes of 2017?

Keith Kleine, director of industry relations for the American Association of Equine Practitioners and the AAEP Foundation (the group's charity arm), offers these pieces of advice, applicable to all equine industries, not just racing:

Don't drown in supply donations "When we got the call from Del Mar (during the California wildfires), I warned them: Don't promote your needs too much, because you'll get more than you ever expected," Kleine says. "Because we're very fortunate, especially in the racing industry, it's a close-knit family. The response was phenomenal — I still have (donated) supplies that I have in a storage unit. We always recommend that in a disaster, financial giving is the best."

Work with known entities Kleine encourages equine facilities to work within their state emergency management systems and get to know the major players ahead of time — the individuals, government entities and nonprofits that will be linchpins in a disaster. "While there is great giving and great hearts out there, you have to be cautious," he says, noting that people have been known to take advantage of disasters by driving in with trailers as if to help evacuate animals, then looting homes or stealing livestock. Build relationships with trusted people in advance, he says.

Don't self-deploy "I know everybody wants to respond and do things, but we certainly don't want people that are self-deploying into a situation that's going to put them or the animals in harm's way," Kleine says. By setting up relationships in advance, those on the front lines know they can call for reinforcements when needed.

Microchipping works "We fully support microchipping and applaud any of the equine entities out there (encouraging it)," Kleine says. Microchips helped identify some of the horses set loose at San Luis Rey (during the Lilac Fire in California) and reunite them with their owners. Since The Jockey Club started requiring it for foals born in 2017 and later, Thoroughbreds affected by natural disasters in the future will be more easily identifiable.

“We had no idea that the fund would become so impactful and so necessary in responding the way we did to the natural disasters of 2017,” says Crady.

A One-Two Punch in the Caribbean

The fund was first pressed into service for disaster relief when Hurricane Irma struck the Caribbean on Sept. 7. A Category 5 storm at its peak, Irma came about two weeks after Hurricane Harvey had walloped Houston, Texas. The smaller Caribbean islands felt most of its impact — Antigua, Barbuda, Saint Martin, the British and U.S. Virgin Islands, Turks and Caicos — as well as Cuba and Puerto Rico, but it also hit the U.S. mainland.

TCA received a call from Shelley Blodgett, the director and co-founder of Caribbean Thoroughbred Aftercare Inc. (CTA), a group that transitions retiring racehorses from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands back to the U.S. mainland. The organization is based in Puerto Rico but also serves a racetrack in St. Thomas and one in St. Croix. “I had no idea that there were even racetracks there (in the U.S. Virgin Islands), but there are, and Hurricane Irma ravaged both of those tracks,” Crady says.

About 100 Thoroughbreds were housed at the two tracks combined, and Blodgett was trying to get hay to them from Puerto Rico. She requested an emergency grant

from the Horses First Fund.

The fund is governed by a committee, Crady explains, consisting mostly of TCA board members and a couple of other TCA supporters. It reviewed the request — the need was obvious — and approved a grant to cover the cost of purchasing and shipping about 500 bales of hay.

Then came Maria.

Also a Category 5 storm at its peak, Hurricane Maria slammed into Puerto Rico on Sept. 20 at Category 4 strength. It was the worst natural disaster in Puerto Rico’s history. The electrical grid and other utilities were already somewhat precarious before the storm hit; the aftermath found the entire island without electricity and



While Hipódromo Camarero racetrack’s barns remained relatively intact after Hurricane Maria, 90 percent of the roofs were destroyed.

COURTESY SHELLEY BLODGETT

much of it without running water or communications. Ground travel was nearly impossible due to downed trees and power lines.

It was a humanitarian crisis. Although officials initially estimated the human death toll to be only 64, a subsequent Harvard University study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* estimates that as many as 4,645 Puerto Ricans died as a result of Hurricane Maria, making it an even deadlier event than Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

And amid all this destruction and human suffering, there were about 1,000 racehorses.

Puerto Rico has a significant Thoroughbred industry, with several breeding farms, Hipódromo Camarero racetrack and La Escuelita Hípica jockey school, which has produced many of the top jockeys competing at mainland tracks.

Communication with the island was cut off in the immediate hours after Maria's landfall, but by Sept. 21 Blodgett, who lives in Wellington, Florida, and was desperately trying to make contact with friends on the island, had found photographs of the destruction on the jockey school's Facebook page. She knew things were dire.

Kelley Stobie, CTA's co-founder and chief financial officer, lives in Puerto Rico and was there when the storm hit. It took her several days to make contact with Blodgett (which required traveling to a hilltop miles away from her home to find cell service) and give an initial status report. She'd been able to get to the track and visit all 36 barns. Water had been restored to the track, and Stobie and a few others watered hundreds of horses whose owners and grooms couldn't reach the facility. No horses were killed during the storm — the barns are concrete and withstood the winds — but the zinc barn roofs



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Puerto Rico's racehorses survived the storm, but they faced dehydration, starvation and secondary health issues in its wake.

didn't withstand the hurricane's force. About 90 percent of the barns had lost their roofs.

Stobie and others took many horses to the track's vet clinic to get cuts stitched and colics managed. Feed and transportation, however, weren't available. Even though the horses had survived the storm, without intervention they weren't going to survive the recovery.

"The size of this hurricane made it difficult," Blodgett says. Although Puerto Rico had certainly experienced its share of hurricanes, never had the destruction been so total and widespread.

"They'd never had to do a large-scale relief effort," she says. "I don't think they were prepared. I don't think anybody could be for what happened."

Blodgett can be credited for sounding the urgent alarm, requesting help from various industry organizations as well as the public at large. She penned an op-ed for the *Thoroughbred Daily News* website on Sept. 23, and soon her plea was all over social media.

"We really need the racing industry and other equine organizations in the States to help urgently as there is little time to waste," she wrote. "These horses survived the storm, but are facing dehydration, starvation and risk of secondary health issues (e.g., colic, infection) due to the environmental hazards and lack of basic needs. These are U.S. horses. They do their jobs faithfully as racehorses and deserve better."

A Desperate Search

"We all knew we had to get hay and feed and vet supplies down there ASAP; that was Mission 1," Crady says.

A team came together consisting of a core group of organizations and companies: TCA, CTA, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, The Jockey Club, Brook Ledge Horse Transportation and RanchAid, a Kansas-based organization appointed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to handle agricultural needs in disaster areas.

Gathering the needed supplies was the easy part, accomplished simply by



The challenge wasn't gathering food and supplies for stranded racehorses in Puerto Rico but, rather, finding a way to get them there.

reaching out to various networks; people were eager to help. Getting the supplies to the island, however, seemed to be a nearly insurmountable task.

Because of the scope of the devastation, FEMA had taken control of the recovery efforts and airports. It controlled who could land and when. "Large animals and livestock do not have priority," Blodgett says.

"We realized this would be a challenge," Crady adds. "Getting clearances to provide supplies and aid to horses when pretty much every flight in there was humanitarian-based was going to be a challenge — certainly an uphill battle."

The team looked into sending the supplies by ship out of Jacksonville, Florida. But there was a backlog of shipping containers in San Juan because none of the workers could get there to unload them. "That wasn't going to work for us with the immediacy that we needed," Crady says. "So the hunt was on for a plane. We asked everyone and anyone we could think of."

They asked equine air transport companies and private aviation companies. They even contacted Thoroughbred owners who they thought might have private jets. They found plenty of people who wanted to help, but even with TCA's extensive Thoroughbred industry connections, who routinely fly horses and people around the globe, nothing was working.

"We literally had 22 tons of alfalfa cubes and \$10,000 in vet supplies and two satellite phones ready to go, but we couldn't get it there," Crady recalls. "It was quite a frustrating time for sure, knowing (there were) so many horses in need and we have supplies, we just need to get them there."

An email from Blodgett on Sept. 27 brought a report from Stobie, who was still on the frontlines: "Things are bleak. We need immediate forage, hay and manpower to care for the horses."

Finally, on Sept. 28 Terry Finley, owner and founder of West Point Thoroughbreds and a member of TCA's board of directors, provided a ray of hope.

"He said he knew someone who was a shareholder in a company called Swift Air, and he could get us a plane," Crady says. "That person turned out to be Vinny Viola, of St. Elias Stable in New York. We had a plane!"

They sent the supplies and feed to the Miami Airport the next day. "But we knew it wasn't going to be that easy," says Crady. "We knew getting landing permission at a FEMA-controlled airport was going to be a challenge, but we were bound and determined to try."

They were given a green light for departure on Sept. 30, and Stobie lined up drivers and trucks to meet the plane in San Juan and unload the supplies. But then an issue with the cargo caused the departure date to be moved to Oct. 1. Stobie again arranged for trucks and drivers to meet the plane.

"And then, just before the scheduled loading time, we learned that FEMA pulled our slot — those are words I'll never forget, 'pulled our slot' — because there were no ground-handling crews available in San Juan," Crady recalls.

The flight was again rescheduled for the next day. By this point, no one involved dared get optimistic because



PHOTOS COURTESY SHELLEY BLODGETT

The TCA coordinated the delivery of three palletloads of feed and supplies.

TCA provided supplies for both horses and humans displaced by the fire that engulfed San Luis Rey Downs.

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there had been so many starts and stops already. But a hopeful sign came when one of the Swift Air employees texted Crady a photo of the cargo loaded onto the plane. “That was a super good sign, we’re moving forward here,” Crady says. “The wheels were still not up on the airplane, but we were loaded at least.”

Finally, on Oct. 2, almost two weeks after Hurricane Maria smashed into Puerto Rico, Swift Air Flight 401 departed Miami at 4:30 a.m. It was the first of three planes full of supplies that the team helped get into Puerto Rico.

“It was crazy. I don’t think any of us had ever been through anything like that before,” Crady says. “It would not have been possible without that incredible team that came together; our only goal was to help the horses.”

Shortly after the third cargo plane delivered supplies, hay and feed production resumed on the island so the airlifts were no longer needed. Things have slowly improved, but recovery in Puerto Rico is ongoing, Blodgett says. Racing has resumed at Camarero four days a week, and most of the horses now have roofs over their heads.

“It’s always a challenge to care for horses on an island,” she says. “They just don’t have all the resources they need, even under normal circumstances.”

TCA’s Horses First fund provided \$16,446 for hurricane relief in 2017, while total relief efforts from all partners totaled over \$200,000.

No Rest for the Weary

Of course, that wasn’t the end of 2017’s disaster parade. As hurricane season wound down, wildfire season in California began ramping up. Northern California suffered devastation in September, and then in December fast-moving fires scorched wide swaths of Southern California.

On Dec. 7 a groom named Leo Tapia posted the video that was every horse owner’s worst nightmare come to life: the desperate attempts to save the horses at San Luis Rey Downs, in Bonsall, as the Lilac Fire engulfed it. When the nightmare ended, 46 horses had lost their lives, scores more were injured and many grooms, owners and trainers had been injured, as well.

Crady learned of the disaster like everyone else, from the Facebook video, as she was getting on a flight to Florida. Later that evening the Horses First Fund committee convened over email — there wasn’t much information available yet, but it was obvious help would be needed.

TCA board member Bing Bush of Abbondanza Racing LLC is based at Del Mar Racetrack, where the San Luis Rey horses and backstretch workers were evacuated to.

“Bing became our frontline there in California and worked with the track to identify what the needs were,” says Crady.

TCA provided supplies for the displaced horses — shavings, halters, lead ropes, etc. — as well as for the backstretch workers, who had nothing but the clothes on their backs and needed household supplies and clothing. Additionally, with the help of Coolmore America, which donated two Uncle Mo seasons, TCA funded a voucher program for backstretch workers so they could get food at the Del Mar concession.

In this case the Horses First Fund was helping humans as much as it was helping the horses. “That was something that the committee discussed; up until California, the Horses First Fund was used specifically for horses,” Crady says. “But TCA’s mission is to help both horses and humans. The committee felt, ‘Look, without these backstretch workers, these folks who are caring for our horses, we don’t have an industry. They’re the backbone of what we do.’ So yes, it’s necessary to support them when large-scale disaster strikes.” TCA provided \$46,814 in relief for the horses and people affected by the fires.

As the 2018 hurricane season begins, “the Horses First Fund remains there, able and ready to assist should natural disaster strike our Thoroughbreds or their caretakers again in the future,” says Crady.

The fund has been a vital addition to TCA’s core effort of raising money to distribute via the grant application and review process, which Crady emphasizes will continue as usual. “We’re not quitting our day job; that’s still our core function,” she says. “But we are growing, and one of the areas of growth that we saw a need for is in this disaster response area. That’s where Horses First comes in.”

The Horses First Fund is open for contributions even when there’s no ongoing disaster response. You can donate via TCA’s website: tca.org/donations.

If you’d like to support the effort to bring retiring racehorses in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands back to the U.S., you can donate to Caribbean Thoroughbred Aftercare Inc. via adoptcaribbeanottb.org/adopt/donate. 🐾

Erin Hartly manages communications and social media for the Retired Racehorse Project. She’s an event rider based in Baltimore.

From Disaster Survivors to Makeover Contenders

Proving yet again that you can’t keep a good Thoroughbred down, several survivors of 2017 disasters are being pointed at the Thoroughbred Makeover.

Big Twist: A 2014 Florida-bred gelding (United States – My Big Woman, Johannesburg), Big Twist survived Hurricane Maria and returned to racing. He earned \$7,860 in 12 starts and last ran at Hipódromo Camarero, in Puerto Rico, in January. Caribbean Thoroughbred Aftercare (CTA) placed him with Suzanna Norris of Hidden Acres Rescue for Thoroughbreds, in Cocoa, Florida.

Cannot Stop: This 2013 New York-bred gelding (Alphabet Soup – Katze Fau, Sea of Secrets) earned \$15,367 in 24 starts. CTA placed him with Hunter Landing Equestrian and Kelly Lasher of Blossvale, New York. Watch for him in this year’s team competition.



God Of Heaven and Ellen Murphy

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God Of Heaven: A 2013 gelding (Drosselmeyer – Are You Kidding, Demaloot Demashoot) bred in Kentucky by John O’Meara and Winstar Farm, he earned \$7,211 in his 17 starts, all at Camarero. CTA facilitated his return to the U.S. after Hurricane Maria. He’ll be competing at the Makeover with dressage trainer Ellen Murphy of Georgetown, Kentucky.

Run Binky Run: A 2008 Kentucky-bred mare (Songandaprayer – Tobin’s Fortune, Fortunate Prospect), she narrowly escaped euthanasia twice: once, when she retired from racing before CTA stepped in, and a second time after suffering a serious hoof injury during Hurricane Maria from which she almost didn’t recover. She raced 96 times, with 80 of those starts coming at Camarero, and earned \$67,765. Kyle Rothfus, the 2017 Thoroughbred Ambassador Award winner, will be competing her at the Makeover.

Sassy Ashley: A 2013 mare (English Channel – Indy Jazz, A.P. Indy) bred at Calumet Farm, in Kentucky, she earned \$39,760 in 15 starts and was retired after surviving the fire at San Luis Rey Downs in California in December. Neigh Savers Foundation placed the mare with Kalley Krickeberg of Petaluma, California.

Sly Runner: A 2013 Oklahoma-bred gelding (Langfuhr – Runaway Magic, Runaway Groom) with just one start, he survived the Thomas Fire in California’s Ventura and Santa Barbara counties in December. He’s headed to the Makeover with owner Holli Heilman of Ventura.

Ten Tequilas: A 2010 California-bred gelding (Ten Most Wanted – Tijuana Baby, Elusive Quality), he earned \$52,693 in 66 starts. CTA placed him with War Horses at Rose Bower, in Appomattox, Virginia, and he’s being given some let-down time before aiming for the 2019 Makeover.