

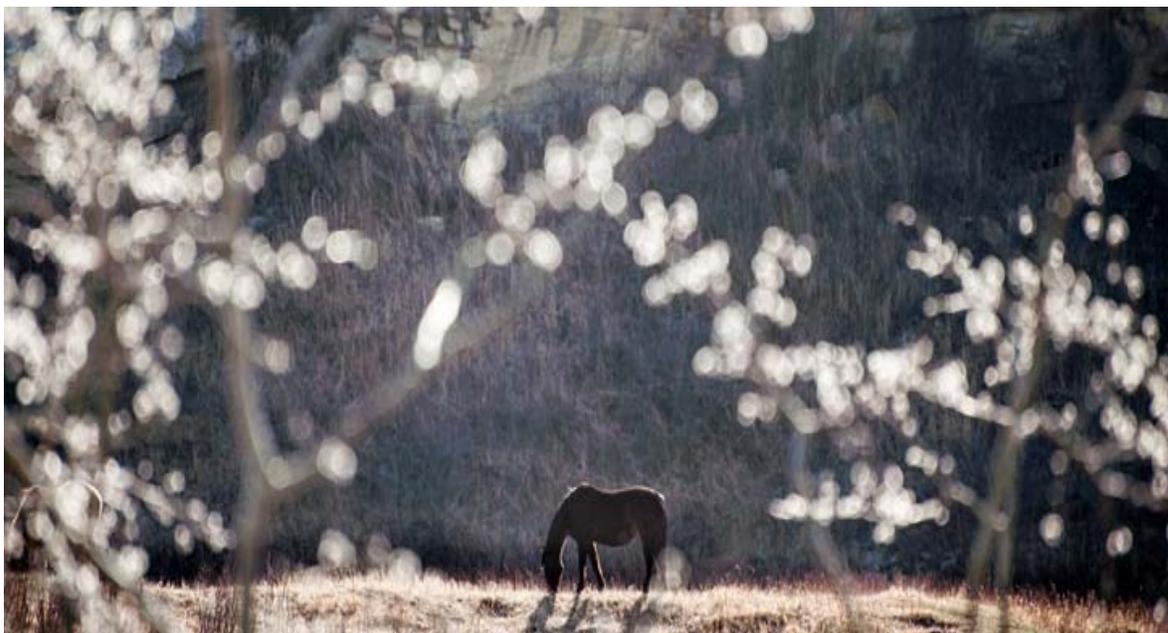
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Saying goodbye to Flicka

[5 Comments](#) Posted Apr. 19th, 2012 by [Barb Glen](#)

2



Owners suffer a sense of loss and need to be treated with respect and compassion after the death of a horse. An Alberta business aims to provide support to owners and horses. | Mike Sturk photo

It was time to let the horse go.

The owner and her husband met at the boarding facility near Water Valley, Alta., where the horse had lived its last years.

The owner said her goodbye. Blinded by tears, she walked into nearby woods, trailed by her husband who was offering comfort.

When she came back, the veterinarian had administered the lethal injection and the horse was dead.

Greg Alexander was there too, having spoken quietly with the owner and the horse before its end.

Sharon Taylor recounts the event, which occurred at her horse boarding facility in January. She is no stranger to such sad situations because she specializes in boarding older horses.

And she has nothing but praise for Alexander, who operates Just Passing, a service that provides counseling to owners, care to horses and disposal of horses' bodies after they are put down.

“For someone like Greg to come into a situation where a member of your family has just died, words can never replace the feelings that you’ve had toward the animal,” said Taylor.

“You need to be treated tenderly and he has a way of doing that, even if he’s never met you before.”

Alexander has been involved in the horse industry for 25 years. Raised on a dairy farm near Balzac, Alta., he once owned and operated a horse training facility and still ranches near Nanton, Alta.

Only recently did he hang out his shingle to offer horse transport and bereavement services.

“I just kind of think it’s an honour to help the horse pass,” said Alexander. “I’m kind of connected to the spirit, and the need for both the people and the horse.”

The soft-spoken horseman takes a practical approach to horses at the end of their lives, whether their deaths are decided due to injury, age or owner inability to care for them.

He will assist owners as they wrestle with a decision to put a horse down, work with veterinarians who do the job via injection or dispatch the horse himself with a rifle.

Then he will transport the body according to owners' wishes.

Alexander admits he sees a lot of horse owner guilt and tears.

"It can be hard," he said. "Lots of the people already know (it's time to put a horse down.) They just need somebody to agree with them.

"I will go in and talk to the people and talk to the horse, assess the horse and he will pretty much tell me, one way or another, if he is ready."

Alexander has no veterinary training but he has confidence in his connection with animals and the information he gathers for himself and obtains from horse owners.

"Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes not. It sounds weird and people will laugh at you, but I feel the spirit. That's what I look for."

Taylor has witnessed Alexander's assistance more than once, and she agrees with his assessment. She said he has a special way with horses, respectful and kind.

Alexander said owners are struggling with an irrevocable decision. He doesn't find the work pleasant but the reward lies in helping people.

And although he has little sympathy for those ridding themselves of a horse because it failed on the show or racing circuit, he accepts it as a fact of life. It's better for the horse to be put down than neglected, he said matter-of-factly.

"Everybody loves their horse, but lots love their horse while it's winning. If it doesn't win, they love the new one better. It's a shallow thing, some of it."

However, it's the cases in which owners love their horses where his services are often needed, he said. It is not easy work.

"I hope I never get to the point where it doesn't choke me up. I think that's part of the support. It's not something I will ever take for granted or callously."

The service extends to disposal, which is an often difficult part of the process because of size and logistics.

Alexander will assist in horse burial on an owner's property, deliver it to a landfill where he has made prior arrangement, take it to the humane society for cremation or provide what he calls "circle of life" service, taking the horse to a remote location where scavengers have their way.

“That is still my preferred, it’s the way that makes the most sense,” Alexander said. “The wildlife gets some free dinner and there’s nothing in the groundwater. That’s the way it’s supposed to work.”

Options depend on whether the horse was given drugs before it died. In that case, the landfill, burial or incineration are the available options.

If the owner requests, he will also deliver animals to the Fort Macleod horse plant for slaughter, an option that offers some financial return to the owner.

Rendering companies will also pick up dead animals but what used to be a free service now costs \$250 and pickup may not be immediate. Handling of the body may also leave something to be desired.

Alexander said the renderers may not pick up bodies for days or weeks, causing additional grief to owners.

Alexander offers his service throughout Western Canada. Besides bereavement matters, he offers custom horse transport, specializing in loading challenges and special needs.

He isn’t constantly busy but thinks that might change since he started advertising his services.

“One lady, she’s actually put me in her will and upon her death then her animals will all be euthanized and I will be called in to pick up the pieces.

“She promised all her animals when she got them, that they would never have to look for a home again.”

To his knowledge, there are no similar services offered in Canada.

Alexander said his primary role is support to owners and dignity to horses when they are put down as well as afterward.

“The horse doesn’t mind. The horse doesn’t hold a grudge because you couldn’t afford to keep it anymore and you put it down. I think a lot of people just need to hear that.

“I’m not by any means a professional counsellor, but the horses, they tell me. They know what they need.”

More information is available at www.justpassinghorses.ca.

- For a horse to receive a humane death it must be rendered immediately unconscious and die without regaining consciousness. Most recommended methods of euthanasia involve agents that rapidly affect the brain.

- Lethal injection of barbiturate by veterinarians only
 - Penetrating captive bolt
 - Shooting is a humane method of killing provided the shot penetrates the brain and does significant damage. Knowledge of the anatomy is essential. Shooting a horse should only be done by persons well versed in handling firearms and licensed to use them
 - The owner of a dead animal must dispose of it within 48 hours of its death
 - The carcass can be picked up and taken to a licensed rendering plant
 - It can be buried on-farm according to rules under the Destruction and Disposal of Dead Animals Act (Alberta)
 - It can be disposed to allow for scavenging if it was not given drugs before its death or as a means of death
 - On-farm composting may not be used for animals weighing more than 100 kilograms. Horse carcasses may be taken to a Class 1 composting facility
 - Carcasses may be incinerated in accordance with regulations
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