

HITTING ITS STRIDE

Written by Mary Alan Woodward | Contributing Writer Wednesday, 16 April 2008

The sound most people around Churchill Downs want to hear is someone saying, “Congratulations, here are your winnings.”

But for the staff at the Kentucky Derby Museum next door, it’s the following words, spoken last Friday by Beth and Richard Walters of Chicago, that are music to the ear:

“This is great – the exhibits are good. The museum is larger and more elaborate than we expected, and they found creative ways to display things. There’s lots of room to park, too.”

Since 1985, the Kentucky Derby Museum has been earning that kind of praise for exhibits that dazzle the senses, intrigue the mind and spur the imagination. Visitors may view footage of the world’s most famous horse race from as far back as 1918, test their trivia knowledge, and gain a new appreciation for thoroughbred horses and the people whose lives revolve around them.

Most people assume that Churchill Downs and KDM are two halves of one whole, based on the fact that they are side-by-side on Central Avenue, share an impressive exterior architectural design, and pay a whole lot of attention to the first Saturday in May.

“It’s true that we have the best next-door neighbor in the world, but we aren’t owned by Churchill Downs. We’re a nonprofit organization,” said KDM executive director Lynn Ashton. “We are also one of Louisville’s top attractions. Last year, we had about 213,000 visitors. We feel that we are successful if we have 200,000. That’s the mark we strive for each year.”

In the saddle

A survey conducted last year at KDM found that most of those visitors considered the “most dynamic” exhibit to be “The Greatest Race,” which holds the distinction of being the world’s first 360-degree film presentation in high-definition. The show, which captures the very essence of Derby Day, is updated every June to include the latest winner.

“I know the script by heart – I could stand in the crowd and talk right along with it – but ‘The Greatest Race’ still gets to me, and I know it has the same effect on the staff,” Ashton said. “There is still a tear in our eyes, and we feel that chill up our spines.”

The best of the best are celebrated in these halls, as evidenced by the new display of the freeze-dried Garland of Roses awarded to Giacomo in 2005. But the daily hard work that is necessary to nurture a winner is highlighted as well: “The Jockeys and the Backside” encourages visitors to learn about the world of jockeys, exercise riders, grooms, hot walkers, and others who seldom get the recognition they deserve.

Guest who want to see what the track looks like from between a horse’s ears enjoy the interactive exhibit called Riders Up! Wannabe jockeys mount a pair of horse mannequins in front of television screens, receive instructions about proper body positioning, and pretend to be in the race that unfolds before them.

Expanding education

The museum is an educational and cultural attraction, as well as an entertaining one. People expect to find

diagrams of horse anatomy attractively displayed and explained, but unusual items also pique their interest in KDM's hallways and rooms.

"In the 'African-Americans in Thoroughbred Racing' exhibit, people are surprised to see where the phrase 'the winner's purse' comes from," Ashton said. "There actually used to be a purse that held the first-place money, and we've got one."

The staff has developed 14 lesson plans that take KDM's information about horses and racing into Kentuckiana schools.

"We educate more than 50,000 students each year, with lessons about economics, music, equine biology and much more for fourth- through 12th-graders. That outreach is made possible by a grant from the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association and an anonymous donor; and the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels bought us a van for transporting the instructors and materials," Ashton said. "We also have a retired educator, Linda Griffin, who goes into nursing homes to play racing games with the residents, helps them make their own Derby hats and encourages them to share their Derby memories."

Trackside teaching

KDM has extended its educational and cultural outreach to the employees of Churchill Downs as well. With the generous support of the Klein Family Foundation, WinStar Farm and many other donors, the Klein Family Learning Center (also known as the Backside Learning Center) has offered classes in a variety of subjects to track workers since 2004.

The facility has a library and classrooms for studying English as a second language, money management, citizenship, computer skills – even art and music. GED classes, like many others, are available in Spanish as well as English. "Workforce" programs under the umbrella title of Groom Elite enhance the knowledge and professional skills of horsemen at several levels, including trainers and racehorse owners.

"Our goal is to help improve quality of life and work for track workers. There are some other tracks that have ESL, but Churchill Downs is the only one that has a school," Ashton said. "In the past several years, we have positively affected the lives of more than 1,000 workers, and we're very proud of that. One employee from France has just become a U.S. citizen, and we had a party for her."

Art of the backside

On Monday, KDM held the preview party of its newest exhibit, "Dream Chasers," which highlights "the Art of Living on the Backside" through Dec. 31. Entrance is included in the \$10 museum admission fee.

Art classes at the Backside Learning Center inspired this show of creations by about two dozen track employees.

"Some of them didn't finish high school, while others are college graduates. What they have in common is their love and passion for the horse," Ashton said. "We discovered that we have unbelievably good artists on the backside who have captured their dreams and aspirations in wonderfully artistic ways."

Farrier Howard Byrn fashioned oversized flowers and a garden gate from horseshoes and other metal found around the track barns. Exercise rider Sarah Arnold painted primitives of horse farms and racetracks. Elegantly hand-tooled saddles, wooden duck decoys, photographs, jewelry and a folk art Noah's Ark round out the astonishing collection.

“The items will be sold at the end of the show,” Ashton said. “But we want people to see beyond the objects and learn about the people who made them, so we’ve added pictures and text about each artist. This exhibit is a great way to have synergy with the backside of the track and the Learning Center. It has all come together beautifully.”

At full gallop

Although that exhibit is up and running, there is much more for the KDM staff to pull together, as the running of the Kentucky Oaks and Kentucky Derby approach. Vacations are out of the question from mid-April until mid-May.

Upcoming special events include the annual Kentucky Derby Museum Gala on April 26. The black-tie event will welcome New York fashion designers Mark Badgley and James Mischka, as well as James and Ida Mae Tafel, owners of 2007 Derby winner Street Sense.

On May 2 and 3, the two biggest racing days, the museum will be closed to the public and reserved for private events, such as the Kentucky Colonels Derby party.

“There is so much going on those days, our staff often works around the clock. The day and night clean-up crews overlap. At one point, there is only half an hour between different events, so we have very little time for cleaning up and setting up,” Ashton said. “And since Sunday, May 4, is a regular work day for us, we have to have the entire museum pristine again and ready for visitors.”

That day, on which Derby fever is only beginning to subside, is a great time for local and out-of-town visitors to stop by, she added.

“That’s when we get our largest crowd of the year. We run the just-finished Derby film on a loop, and you might see the winning owner and trainer watching it,” she said. “Everyone around you is talking about the day before. If you can’t make it to the track for the big race, May 4 at the museum is another great opportunity to catch the flavor of what Derby is all about.”

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