

ON-TRACK LEARNING

Written by Jacob Glassner Tuesday, 15 May 2007

The backside at Churchill Downs is it's own little world – a fenced-in island in the shadows of the Twin Spires. Many horsemen live where they work, either in dorms on the backside or in tack rooms connected to the stables.

And if the backside had a national language, more than likely it would be Spanish.

Between 60 and 70 percent of the more than 1,000 people who work on the backside during a meet are Spanish-speaking individuals predominantly from Mexico and Guatemala.

Seeing a need to help these citizens of the backside adapt to their culture, the Kentucky Derby Museum and Churchill Downs opened the Backside Learning Center in May of 2004 with grants from the Klein Family Foundation and WinStar Farms.

“We provide educational programming for the horsemen who work on the backside at Churchill and at Trackside Louisville,” said Jennifer Hoert, the center's director.

The center offers a variety of free classes including English, computer, art, guitar and Groom Elite, a program that teaches horsemen to be grooms. It has a library, a single classroom and a computer lab with 12 computers.

The English classes were an immediate success.

“There's been a great response. People are very interested,” Hoert said. “They want to learn English. They don't get any kind of incentives from us. They just come because they want to learn.”

The center, which is run almost completely by volunteers, has about 100 students in its three English classes, which range from beginner to advanced. Besides formal classes, it also offers individual tutoring.

Student Elias Perez, 20, who came to the United States from Guatemala when he was 18, has taken classes at the learning center for about two years.

“The most important thing that I have learned here is English because when I came to the United States, I didn't speak English,” he said.

Knowing English helped Perez make the transition from being a hot walker to becoming a groom. Grooms earn more pay and also receive a portion of purses when their horses win.

Student Gelper Cardona knew nothing about English or computers when he came to the States from Guatemala a year ago.

“I'm from Guatemala, and in Guatemala it's difficult to study English,” he said, as he gripped a pencil and wrote sentences in English under the watchful eye of his tutor, Jack Cox. “It's necessary for my job because my boss only speaks a little bit of Spanish.”

Cardona now sends e-mails regularly and even helps some of his co-workers with basic English. He works as a groom and is a graduate of the Groom Elite program.

The Groom Elite program isn't about mucking stalls or how to brush a horse, Hoert said. It teaches about nutrition, bandaging, tack and horse anatomy, and it's split between hands-on training and lectures.

"They learn to be sensitive to how to better care for that horse," Hoert said.

Backside workers are migratory to an extent – many follow trainers from track to track or travel to warmer climates in the winter – but the backside has a constant population of horsemen. When the track closes for the winter, the learning center offers services at Trackside Louisville, which is a year-round training facility.

The backside's population peaks at about 1,500 during the Derby, Hoert said. Yet at the learning center, instruction often boils down to one tutor guiding one student through the intricacies of English.

"I just like to see them be happy and to function and do things on their own," volunteer Jack Cox said. "I like to see people be self-sufficient."

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