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HELPING THE 'ALMOST INVISIBLE' - BACKSTRETCH NURSE: Quincy's Trish Bowe tends bites, ailments for Suffolk Downs stable crews

By LANE LAMBERT
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BOSTON - Suffolk Downs trainer Felix Perez was matter of fact when he showed Quincy nurse Trish Bowe the horse bite on his hand. "It's deep," the 65-year-old native of Puerto Rico told her, as he settled into her tiny office in the race track's medical-clinic trailer. Plus, the bite was three days old. Perez didn't want stitches - he couldn't flex his hands as well that way. He wanted Bowe to wrap his finger and give him some pain medication so he could keep working in the stables.

In times past, workers like Perez would have been on their own with such injuries - maybe an emergency room visit, maybe a self-prescribed dose of a veterinarian's medicine. Now they take their ailments to Bowe.

Two mornings a week, she and a doctor from the nonprofit Boston Health Care For the Homeless tend to the hundreds of low-paid trainers, grooms, riders and stable hands who look after the horses at the East Boston race track.

Since they have no health insurance, the free clinic is the only place they're likely to get flu shots, prescriptions, tuberculosis tests and checkups, and that's one of the reasons why Bowe always looks forward to her visits there, a decade after she arrived.

"They don't think of medical care as something they deserve," she said. "But they deserve it as much as anyone."

She and Dr. Claire Carlo have had their own sort of family practice amid the weatherbeaten stables and outbuildings, and Bowe says she's never considered trading the track for a higher-paying position at a teaching hospital or suburban office.

"They're always so grateful for what we do for them," she said. "And where else could I work with such a cast of characters?"

The backstretch workers and Boston's homeless men and women have been Bowe's calling since she graduated from nursing school at New England Baptist Hospital in 1994.

The Indiana native got her introduction to the homeless as a Boston College student in the late 1980s when she was a non-medical volunteer at Pine Street Inn, Boston's biggest shelter. Hospitals weren't hiring many nurses by the time she got her nursing degree, so she took a job with Health Care For the Homeless. She's never looked back.

Bowe and Carlo have run the Suffolk Downs clinic since it opened in 1998. Bowe also works five afternoons a week at Pine Street Inn.

Now 38, she grew up riding horses at a farm near her childhood home. These days she enjoys feeding snacks of carrots and peppermint candy to thoroughbreds in the stables across the road from the clinic. But her deepest affection is for her clients, many of whom would be misfits in more conventional jobs.

"Some nurses can work with the elderly, or with patients with (multiple sclerosis)," she said. "I couldn't. This is a population I'm comfortable with."

"We had nothing"

It's a work force that's all but invisible to anyone outside the track.



Registered nurse Trish Bowe runs a test on Suffolk Downs jockey Milo Fields, who injured a finger while riding. Bowe and Dr. Clair Carlo treat workers at the Boston racetrack, many of whom have no health insurance. (GREG DERR/The Patriot Ledger)

Old-timers like Perez, retired trainer and groom Roger Montbleau and 57-year-old exercise jockey Milo Fields have worked at Suffolk Downs for almost 40 years. Younger, mostly Hispanic grooms and stable hands shuttle with the race seasons from New England to the Gulf Coast and back, living in bare "tack rooms" in backstretch dorms.

Because tracks like Suffolk Downs are seasonal, the 300 to 400 workers there are classified as migrants, and thus are exempt from state wage, hour and benefit laws. The men who show up at Bowe's clinic put in seven-day work weeks to earn around \$300 to \$500, with no vacation days or health insurance and the near-certainty that, if they don't get sick, they'll eventually get hurt by a horse.

That's what happened to Fields a few weeks ago, when he caught his hand in the bridle as he tumbled from a horse. "It wasn't getting any better," he said, so he made his first visit to the clinic, clad in his rider's helmet and boots. Bowe and Carlo checked him and ordered a hospital X-ray.

Suffolk Downs is one of the few tracks in the country with any on-site health service. Horse owner Jim Greene opened the Eighth Pole clinic for drug and alcohol treatment in 1989, but didn't provide basic health care. Until Health Care For the Homeless shared trailer space with Greene, "we had nothing," Perez said. "It was survival."

"A closed-off world"

As needed as the clinic was, it took a while for the workers to come around. On her first day there in 1998, "no one would see me," Bowe said.

"This is a closed-off world," she said. "It's like a family. If they don't know you, it takes a long time to build up a rapport."

Suspicion melted when Greene started telling people that Bowe and Carlo were OK. Today, Bowe is on close terms with scores of the workers - among them a former Suffolk Downs trainer who flew from a Florida track a couple of years ago because he wanted Bowe and Carlo to check his chest pains.

Every week Bowe hears about birthday parties and other family goings-on. Trainers bring her finish-line pictures of their winning horses. "You know you've been accepted if they do that," she said.

She gets occasional race tips, too, but never bets on them. "That crosses a line," she said.

Greene says Bowe has persuaded many workers to get immunization shots, go to a dentist and take other preventive care, "things you and I take for granted."

"She's golden," he said.

By the end of a recent morning at the track, Bowe had seen several workers along with Perez and Fields, for blood pressure checks and questions about medication dosages. Perez's bite turned out to be the day's worst injury.

As noon approached, he headed back to the stables, ointment and prescriptions in hand, his wounded finger wrapped in gauze. When Bowe told him it should be fine, he nodded.

"Thanks," he said. "You're the best."

Lane Lambert may be reached at llambert@ledger.com.

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