



AN OPEN LETTER TO THE FREE REIN FAMILY

May 27, 2020

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic has created a truly unprecedented situation that affects us all. Our hearts go out to anyone who has been impacted by the virus, either directly or indirectly. We are thinking about you, hoping that you are healthy and safe. At this time, we want to reach out to let you know how we at Free Rein Center have been faring since we shut down in mid-March.

Background – This crisis has challenged us to adjust our behavior, routines and programs to a wrenching new reality. You may remember that Free Rein ceased all therapeutic riding lessons effective March 16, 2020, in concert with the closing of the Transylvania County Schools. The decision to close down during the outbreak was not easy, knowing that many of our participants rely on our services for their mental, emotional, physical and social well-being. This year held great promise, with record-breaking enrollment, five PATH-certified instructors and the roll-out of new programming, including an inspiring relationship with the Wounded Warrior Project in Asheville. But after considering the recommendations from the CDC, the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of the Governor, Free Rein’s Board of Directors decided that shutting down operations was the only option. Our main concern was for the health and safety of our at-risk population of participants, volunteers, staff and the community.

Analysis of Problem – First and foremost, closing down the spring session did not mean our work was done. What it meant was that there would be no revenue from operations to pay staff and care for our therapy horses. Our herd still required feeding twice daily, veterinary and farrier care and exercise. Second, new procedures had to be implemented concerning social distancing, wearing of face coverings and sanitation of high-touch areas. Third, communication to parents, participants, volunteers and the community needed to be maintained. We also needed to stay in regular contact with the owners of Rockbrook Camp, from whom we rent. Since March 16, this work has been admirably accomplished by three key staff members. Brittany McCathern, program director, has assumed coordination and implementation of these general operations efforts. Rachel Evans, program administrator, has handled the social media communication, maintained contact with volunteers and assisted with horse care and feeding. Jennifer Rouse, office manager, has maintained payroll records, accounts payable and donor records. They have been ably assisted with daily barn chores by a small group of volunteers.

Funding – Finding the money to maintain our program, even at a very reduced level, proved to be quite daunting. An Urgent Appeal Letter, seeking donations for hay, grain, stall supplies and horse care, was distributed to volunteers, parents, board members, donors and the community at large on March 23. The response was overwhelming. We had hoped to raise \$10,000. As of this writing, we have raised more than \$15,000, and donations continue to come in. We feel blessed! We thanked everyone in the community through a letter published April 14, in the *Transylvania Times*. The next need to be addressed was money for payroll. We applied for and received eight weeks of Federal funding through the Payroll Protection Program (PPP) and a small grant from the Federal Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program. In January, before the COVID-19 crisis, we had received a grant from a private family foundation in Asheville that allowed us to purchase much-needed equipment to enhance our programs.

Going Forward – Rockbrook Camp assumes use of the barns and riding arena for the months of June, July and August, which releases Free Rein from some financial obligations. During this time, the board

and staff will continue to review and rewrite policies, communicate with participants and the community through social media and other means, apply for grants and raise money in anticipation of reopening later this summer, or when school resumes. We and the Rockbrook Camp owners are monitoring the latest information about COVID-19 to determine just when we can safely reopen. A small work group consisting of four Free Rein board members and two staff members will review issues concerning programs, volunteers and medical and legal needs so that we can share that information with everyone who needs it before we reopen. (Rockbrook has cancelled all of its summer camp programs.)

Limitations – Much of our planning for the rest of the year is affected by the status of the summer camps, the control of virus spread, county school policies and governmental requirements. Even the status of “The Mane Event,” Free Rein’s annual major fundraising event, is in question. Clearly, the key financial question for Free Rein is when can we begin to generate revenue from operations again.

In Summary – With no revenue from operations and with programs on hold, we are maintaining fiscal restraint. We are keeping our herd of equine partners healthy. We are revising and updating policies and procedures so we can be properly positioned to reopen when it is safe to do so. With continued support from our dedicated sponsors, donors and the community at large, we will resume services strategically, approaching the future with mindful intention.

I was born during the early years of World War II so I relate to this story about perseverance: “*Ahead of attacks on its cities during World War II, the British Government issued posters with messages written to boost morale and mentally prepare its civilians. One of them said, Keep Calm and Carry On.*” This message seems very poignant now that COVID-19 is invoking comparison to a war. You can be assured that Free Rein is keeping calm and that we are carrying on. We will get through this together.

Thank you very much for your continued support of Free Rein Center. Please stay healthy and safe.

Jerry Clouse
Chair, Free Rein Center Board of Directors

