

The Rescue of Belle and Sundance

Local writer finishes book on the heroic rescue of two horses near McBride

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On Birgit Stutz' kitchen wall is a quotation she and her husband put there many years ago from the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupery. It says: "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed."

It's a natural mantra for a horse trainer, but the saying would take on greater meaning two years ago, when the Dunster resident joined the rescue of two horses abandoned on Renshaw Mountain near McBride.

The mare, Belle, and gelding, Sundance, had been left their by their owner after they got stuck in heavy snowfall. The horses were frost-bitten, starved and near death when two snowmobilers discovered them.

The next morning, four McBride residents went back up the mountain with a bale of hay, a handgun and a heart-breaking choice to make: either feed the horses, or shoot them.

The four agreed: there was an undeniable glimmer in the horses' eyes. The decision was made to feed them. But saving them would require a lot more than hay. Many people from McBride and the surrounding area pitched in to dig a three-foot-wide, six-foot-deep, kilometre-long tunnel that became Belle and Sundance's route to freedom.

The ensuing rescue took roughly eight days and temperatures dipped to -30 and -40 while the horses were dug out. It was a heroic tale that was picked up by media outlets around the world.

The story of the rescue is the subject of a new book by Stutz, which will be released next week by Harper Collins.

"It's not just a story for animal-lovers," she says. "It's really about what a community can accomplish by coming together for a common goal."

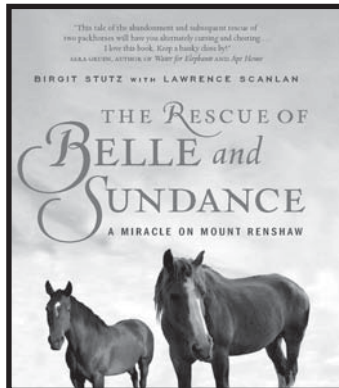
She was approached by an agent after the story appeared on front of the Globe and Mail. The agent called her during Christmas holidays asking her if she's interested in writing a book. When she told the agent she not only a horse trainer, but also a journalist, she was even more excited, Stutz says.

The agent set her up with a co-writer, Lawrence Scanlan, a Kingston writer who had already written several books on horses. Together, they assembled a proposal for the publishing company.

She had been emailing people throughout the rescue, so she had notes about what happened.

"I was thankful for that. I used it as a skeleton."

From her home study that overlooks her cor-



are a lot of lows."

They wrote four different drafts. There was also a lot of back-and-forth through email before the drafts were complete.

"I'm thankful for Larry because I would have lost it without him."

She says she found the end the hardest part to write. The rescue itself was probably the easiest, she says.

"It was so vivid in my memory," she says. "It was very emotional

for me."

She says she hopes people get the message from the book that big things can be accomplished if people work together, no matter their background.

"There were snowmobilers, horse-back riders, people that liked animals, people that just had nothing else to do," she says.

It was their compassion that saved Belle and Sundance, she says. A horse's well-being

ral, Stutz would hunker down in the morning when her concentration is best, often after cleaning and shovelling the stables of her 12 horses earlier that morning.

"I had no idea what I was getting myself into," she says.

"It sounds cool writing a book, and it is. But there

doesn't just depend on money.

"These animals are our prisoners," she says. "We are responsible for them. It'd be different if they'd run away from something – but they were left there by a human, so humans needed to get them down."

After the rescue, Belle and Sundance were adopted, Belle was adopted by an owner south of Prince George, and Sundance was taken to a ranch near Kamloops. Stutz trained Belle this spring. She also rode the now well-fed mare in the McBride Pioneer Days parade in June.

Stutz will be doing a book signing at the McBride Trading Post Nov. 26, and hopes to have books as early as Nov. 13th for the Valemount Book Fair, taking place at the high school.

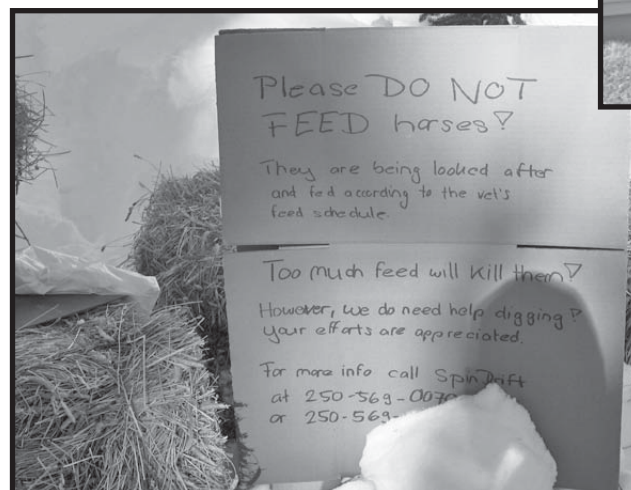
She will also have books for sale at the McBride Festival of Lights and at the Gathering Tree for Late Night Shopping Dec. 3rd.

The McBride Visitor Info Centre will be carrying the book as well as The Farm Store, the McBride Trading Co., the Dunster Store, The Gathering Tree, and Bearfoot-in-the-Park in Jasper.

Birgit operates Falling Star Ranch in Dunster, as well as freelances for magazines and newspapers.

"It was so vivid in my memory... it was very emotional for me."

**Birgit Stutz,
First-time author**



Photos from the rescue as well as a shot of Stutz and Belle just before the Pioneer Days parade in McBride this past June.

Photos: Laura Keil and submitted



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