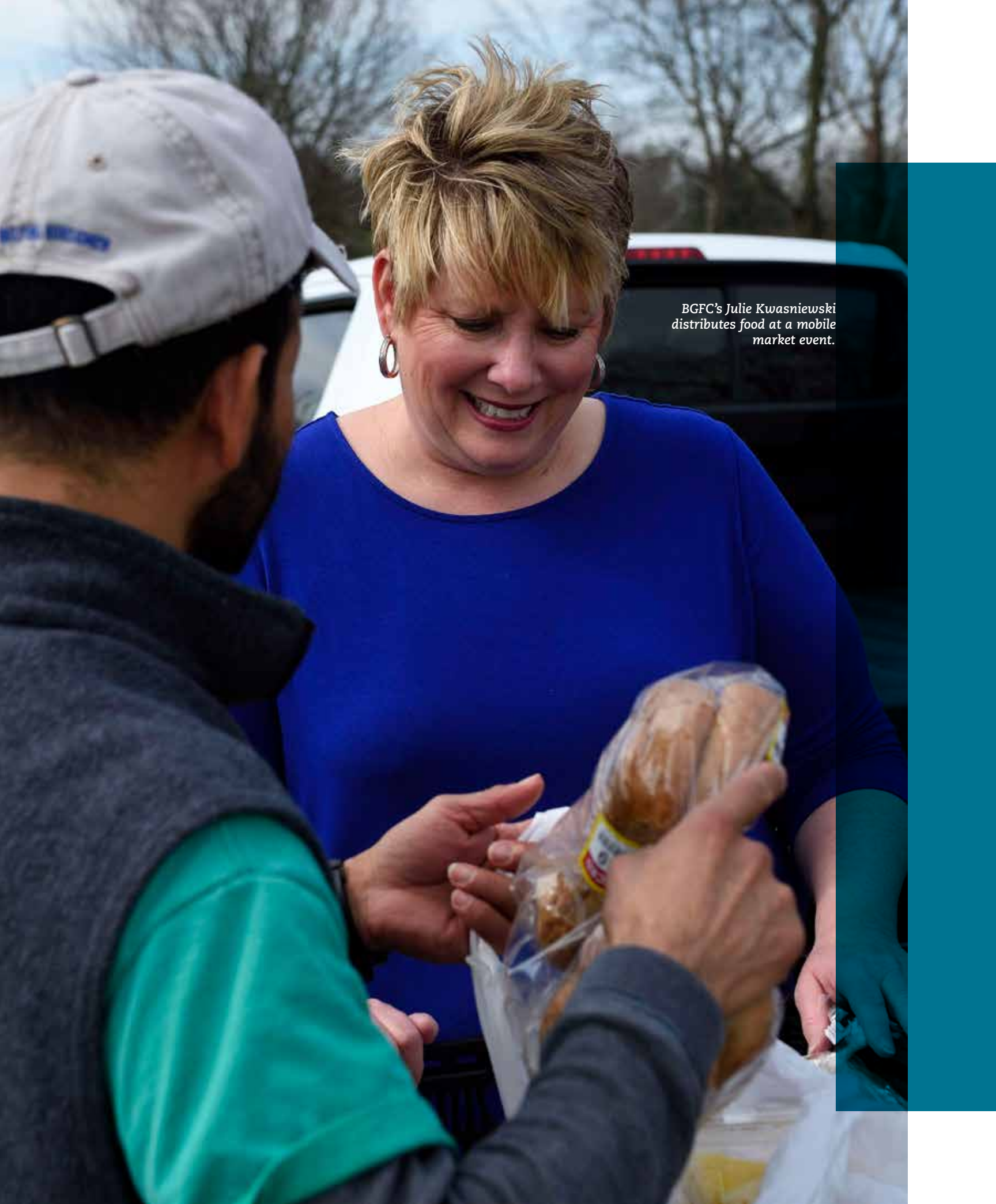


LENDING *a* HELPING HAND



**Blue Grass Farms Charities Extends Support
to Thoroughbred Industry Employees**

By Robin Roenker / Photos by Bill Straus



BGFC's Julie Kwasniewski distributes food at a mobile market event.



The mobile food market distributes 1,400 pounds of food in a typical week.

When a Fallbrook Farm employee fell temporarily ill and landed in the hospital a few years ago, his family struggled to pay the bills. Jared Hughes of Hughes Bloodstock LLC knew about the situation and called Blue Grass Farms Charities for assistance.

“They couldn’t have been any more helpful,” Hughes said. “They got names of the landlord and utilities companies and had everything paid within two days. It was a huge relief for this family.”

Blue Grass Farms Charities (BGFC) — a nonprofit corporation launched nearly two decades ago by Tom Thornbury, a longtime member of the Keeneland sales team now retired; Dr. Thomas Riddle of Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital; and others — exists to provide support in exactly these types of situations.

“We saw the need to offer health and human services to people working behind the scenes in the Central Kentucky Thoroughbred industry,” explained Thornbury, who serves as BGFC’s board treasurer. “We envisioned it as a local mission to support farm and backstretch workers and their families.”

“The workers on the farms and tracks are the lifeblood of the industry,” added Riddle, a member of the BGFC board of directors. “We really owe a lot to them and want to support them in any way we can.”

Targeted outreach

In the years since its founding, Blue Grass Farms Charities has grown to become a go-to area resource, one that is adept at meeting all types of Thoroughbred employee needs — from weekly food assistance and financial support for dental and vision care to supplying donated back-to-school backpacks for kids each year.

Funding for BGFC comes mainly through individual and farm donations as well as private foundation grants and charity fundraisers, including a fall virtual auction. Recently, the charity has used these funds to dramatically ramp up its support services in response to employees’ increased needs during the pandemic.

In recent months, BGFC has worked to provide mobile dental health clinics at area horse farms, as well as basic health care screenings and on-site flu and COVID vaccine clinics, for example.

Additionally, each week, the BGFC’s “mobile market” delivers thousands of pounds of donated food from God’s Pantry and local groceries to farm families via scheduled drop-offs at Keeneland, The Thoroughbred Center, or directly at area horse farms.

“The need is great,” said Bob Baney, owner of RaceRise, a professional race timing and management company, who serves as BGFC’s volunteer food distribution manager. “We’ll distribute 1,400 pounds of food in 14 minutes at a typical weekly drop-off.”

Farm workers and their families who receive the food go out of their way to express their gratitude for the help.

“Recently one lady told me, as I was



Many recipients depend on the bread, vegetables, and other essentials that the mobile market provides.



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BGFC also provides food for babies and young children.

helping her load the groceries into her car, that the donation meant she would be able to buy gas for her car that week,” Baney says. “Our work meant she would have food and that she could afford to buy other things she needed.”

Trusted partner

Thanks to Thornbury’s founding work with the agency, Keeneland has been a supporter of Blue Grass Farms Charities’ mission and outreach work from the charity’s beginnings.

In addition to holding regular food drop-offs for Keeneland backstretch employees, Keeneland teams with Country Boy Brewing in Lexington to produce a spring and fall lager, the sales of which benefit BGFC and its school backpack program. During the pandemic, Keeneland, along with Nourish Lexington and BGFC created Nourish the Backstretch to provide weekly meals and groceries to stable area workers at Keeneland and The Thoroughbred Center (TTC).

BGFC also works in close partnership with Keeneland’s chaplaincy team to provide other needed support, particularly when families face unexpected bills or other financial hardships.

“Blue Grass Farms Charities is an excellent partner that we can call on to step in and help when someone gets behind on a utility bill or needs help paying for eyeglasses, for example,” said Keeneland Chaplain Dean Carpenter. “The team at BGFC has stepped up to bat a number of times to help get our workers back on their feet.”

“BGFC is a great resource for our Keeneland chaplaincy program,” agreed Kari West, Keeneland’s chief of staff and current BGFC board member. “We do a lot to help our backstretch workers here at Keeneland, but at times there may



Left, BGFC provides back-to-school backpacks every year and organizes basic health care screenings, above.

COURTESY BLUE GRASS FARM CHARITIES

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be a specific need that we share with Blue Grass Farms Charities because we have such a great partnership together.” In addition to its collaboration with Keeneland, Blue Grass Farms Charities also has partnered with the University of Kentucky’s Equine Science and Management Program to establish student volunteer opportunities at area farms. UK students in the program have also organized food, toy and toiletry collections to benefit farm workers and their families at various times.

“Having opportunities like this to visit area farms is a great

way for our students to not only have networking opportunities but also for them to see the diversity of opportunities and scope of career options within the industry,” said Kristen Wilson, academic coordinator for UK’s Equine Science and Management Program.

MISSION-FOCUSED

At Dixiana Farm, as at Fallbrook Farm and dozens of others, employees have received assistance paying for rent and other bills when illness or other personal challenges prevented them from working.

BGFC was able to help workers pay their bills and help them stay on track, said Glenna Laureano, Dixiana Farm’s office manager.

In addition to providing food, health services, and expense assistance, Blue Grass Farms Charities also sponsors a popular summer soccer tournament for horse farm employees and an annual Christmas party for farm and backstretch workers and their families.

The charity served more than 1,000 people at its 2021 Christmas event, where attending workers and families re-



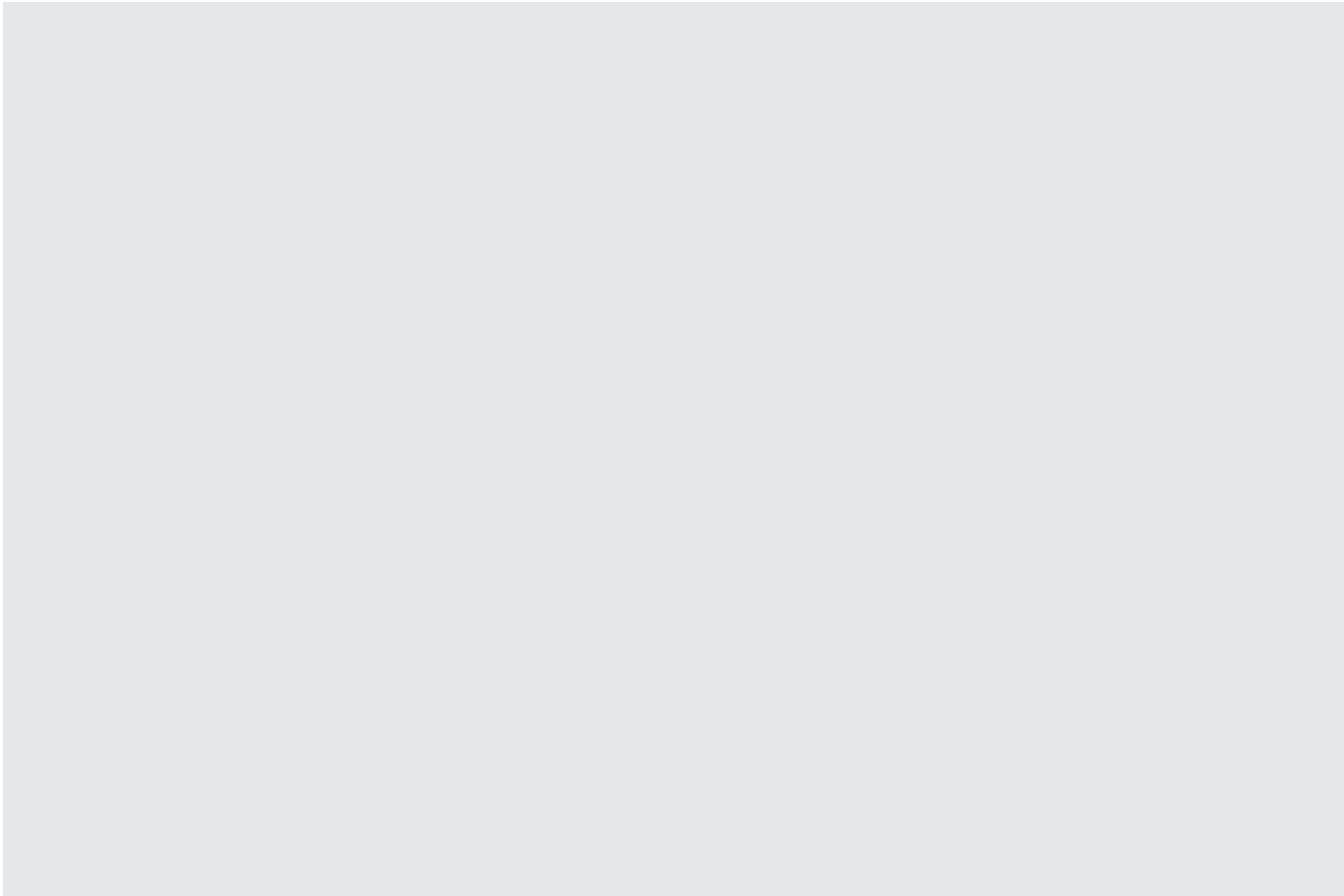
COURTESY, BLUE GRASS FARM CHARITIES

The annual Christmas party for farm and backstretch workers and their families is a popular event.

“

THE WORKERS ON
THE FARMS AND ON
TRACKS ARE THE LIFE-
BLOOD OF THE
INDUSTRY.”

— **BGFC BOARD MEMBER
DR. THOMAS RIDDLE**





To learn more about Blue Grass Farms Charities and its work — as well as how you can help — go to bgfcky.org.



Keeneland Chaplain Dean Carpenter and his team work closely with BGFC to provide essential services.



ceived Walmart gift cards, take-and-make ingredients for a full turkey dinner, Southern Lights passes, gift certificates for new boots or coats, and winter hats and gloves.

The charity also provides roughly 1,000 new backpacks each July for elementary and middle school children of workers at area farms and Keeneland. Over the years, BGFC has also paid the fees to send farm workers' children to various area summer camps.

Above all, BGFC strives to be a source of unfailing support for horse industry workers who may not be sure where else to turn in moments of greatest need. At its heart, the agency serves as a safety net equipped to step in with help when food, medical services, rent or other assistance is needed.

"I truly love this charity," said Julie Kwasniewski, who has served as Blue Grass Farms Charities' executive director since spring 2019. "We want to keep it going and keep it strong, so we can continue to help the more than 5,000 horse farm and track workers in Central Kentucky who are at the heart of our mission." **KM**

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