

Wagons ho!



Horse-drawn rigs pony up funds for MS.

by **Robert Lerosé**

Four months after giving birth to her second child, Kimi Deyarmond woke up with cloudy vision in her right eye. By noon, she couldn't see out of it at all. Following an MRI ordered by a neuro-ophthalmologist, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in October 2016.

Deyarmond, a preschool teacher, comes from a close-knit family in Durand, Michigan. But when her parents invited her and her husband out for dinner in September 2018 because they had something to propose, she was puzzled. "With my mother, I never know what that's going to entail," Deyarmond, 28, says.

Donna and Kevin Doneth, Deyarmond's parents, own Percherons—a breed of towering, 2,000-pound draft horses. They love doing things with the horses: transporting guests to outdoor wedding sites in a wagon or carrying the grand marshal in local parades. After attending a session at the World Percheron Congress Show on how other owners had used their horses for charitable purposes, Donna came up with the idea of a Wagon Train as a National Multiple Sclerosis Society DIY event.

DIY events encourage people to mount their own fundraising and awareness activities for MS research. "What makes DIY great is that the sky is truly the limit. The more creative you can get, the better. Sometimes it's taking what you know and running with it, like what Donna put together," says Stephanie Ford, the Society's development specialist for DIY events in Michigan.



Donna and Kevin Doneth, whose daughter lives with MS, came up with an idea for an MS fundraiser in which their horses would pull wagons as part of a 3-mile ride. Photo courtesy of Kim Deyarmond

Donna reached out to people who drive horses at a county fair for their support and was thrilled with the response.

“In the end, we had nine teams of two horses that carried 20 people each in wagons called surreys and five single-draft horses that pulled small wagons of two to four people. About 15 people rode on regular saddle horses,” she says.

A family undertaking

In April 2019, the Wagon Train took off for a three-mile ride from the Shiawassee County Fairgrounds to a pavilion in McCurdy Park in downtown Corunna, Michigan. A stately line of Clydesdales, Percherons and Belgian breeds clopped through town. Deyarmond’s brother drove horses and her sister supervised the pavilion. Donna and Kevin supplied a barbecue lunch, followed by a silent and live auction before the return trip.

Lori Bedell, a first-grade teacher, and her husband, Ed, hitched up their draft horses, Randy and Roger, and pulled about a dozen people to the fairground in their surrey. “It was a slow-paced ride with lots of people. We had a police escort [at the front and back of the line]. They stopped traffic at all the intersections so we could get through,” she says.

Deyarmond and her two kids rode on the wagon driven by her father, while her husband, Brad, followed in his tool truck in case of any breakdowns. Even though her kids were used to being around horses, it was still an exciting time, especially for her 4-year-old daughter,

Delaney.

“On the way back, one of the girls that babysits for me was riding her horse saddleback, so she let my daughter ride saddleback with her for the hour-and-a-half trip back, which was quite a feat in itself to have to hold her on the saddle,” Deyarmond says.

Brenda Turner, an occupational therapist who works with Deyarmond’s 2-year-old son, Oliver, and has become a family friend, brought along her husband and their friends, the Tyler family, including their 3- and 4-year-old kids, on the ride.



The 2019 Wagon Train event included nine teams of two horses that carried 20 people each in wagons and five single-draft horses that pulled small wagons of two to four people. Plus, about 15 people rode on saddle horses. Photo courtesy of Kim Deyarmond

“The kids loved it. They were so excited to see the horses—going up to them and patting them,” Turner says. “The people leading them were really good about helping them touch the horses. They totally loved the ride and waving at everybody like they were little princesses. They were trying to take in everything. It was really a good activity for young kids to participate in.”

Surprise gifts

Kevin Doneth ran the auction, with some unexpected outcomes.

Turner had her eye on one item in particular: an afghan that Donna had crocheted by hand and embroidered with the Society’s MS ribbon logo. “When it went up for the raffle, I bid on

it—not knowing that Kimi’s husband was bidding on it also. It was cool because I actually got it and gave it back to Kimi because it was something that really meant a lot to her,” she says.

Deyarmond’s doctor’s office staff donated a large wagon for carrying garden supplies, like stepping stones, seeds and mulch. A bidding war broke out between two men, and the wagon eventually went for \$500. “I went to [the winner] afterwards and said that I was curious about his connection to MS. He said [he had] none, that his wife wanted to go for a horse ride that day, and he needed a present for her,” Donna says.

When everything was tallied, the Wagon Train drew around 200 people, raised \$7,565 and revealed some surprising connections to MS.

“I never realized how many people are affected by MS. We’ve known some people for 20 years and didn’t realize they had MS, like the mom of a neighbor girl that went to school with our daughter,” Donna says. “Until [a disease] affects you personally, you always think it’s going to happen to somebody else. As parents, we can’t make the disease go away for our daughter. All we can try and do is help the doctors come up with anything and everything to make her life better—hers and everybody in the same boat.”

Robert Leroise is a Long Island, New York-based writer.

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