

“They are not looking at it on the level of the individual. They are just looking at it as something they need to do, and to hell with the consequences.”

Dr. Pat Meyers

LOST DREAMS: At its peak four years ago, Dr. Pat and Anna Meyers' Emerald Ridge Farm housed up to 100 horses during breeding season. Now it's home to less than 10.



It is estimated

9,000 jobs have been lost in Ontario as a direct result of the Liberal government's decision to end the Slots at Racetracks Program (SARP).

The program that once supported 30,000 full-time equivalent jobs and injected \$345 million into horse racing annually—half of that directly to purses—has devastated lives in the province. At the peak of the 15-year slots program, Ontario had grown to be among the world's best harness racing regions with a leading sire stakes program (\$20 million a year), as well as plentiful tracks (14) and racing opportunities (nearly 1,000 race dates a year).

After SARP officially ended in April 2013, purses plummeted 35 percent, race dates were slashed 39 percent and the number of mares bred to Ontario stallions declined 56 percent.

Yet, the personal toll has been as staggering, if not more so, than the numbers. Even a five-year, \$500-million aid program that launched in April 2014—which amounts to about one-third of what the industry would have derived in that same time under the slots program—cannot undo the damage done and the lives blown asunder.

Here *Hoof Beats* presents four personal tales from the thousands affected by the end of the Slots at Racetracks Program.

Desperate Situations

The human face on the Ontario slots crisis

by Dave Briggs • photos by Claus Andersen

Dr. Pat and Anna Meyers: Death of a Dream

DR. PAT MEYERS DOESN'T MINCE WORDS about the Ontario Liberal government that canceled SARP and sent the breeding farm he operated with his wife, Anna, into a death spiral.

"They basically cut the legs out from underneath you; it's a real kick in the teeth," the veterinarian said on the phone from Kansas City, Mo., where he's on a business trip for his new job as an equine technical services consultant for the Canadian division of pharmaceutical company Merck Animal Health.

It's not what Pat wanted to be doing at age 59, especially after he and Anna bought their dream farm in 2000 and quickly turned the 134-acre Rockwood, Ont., nursery into one of the largest commercial breeding operations in the province. At its peak four years ago, Emerald Ridge Farm stood 10 stallions—both Standardbred and Quarter Horse—and had as many as 100 horses on the property during breeding season.

Pat estimates they invested some \$500,000 to upgrade a farm that needed fencing, new barns—one for the stallions and one for the mares—and high-tech lab equipment for analyzing semen. That didn't come close to matching their spiritual investment.

"Anna and I both put our heart and soul into the place," Pat said, the emotion palpable in his voice. "We were working 80 or 90 hours a week at certain times of the year, but never really got that big payoff in terms of, you know, a yearling selling for a very high price. It was always, 'Next year will be better, next year, next year...' and then the worst nightmare came true—that it never got better. It got worse."

Today, the fields and stalls at Emerald Ridge are virtually empty. There are fewer than 10 horses left at the farm located not far from Mohawk Racetrack. Pat hasn't bred a mare this year or last and he is no longer collecting stallions. There are just five yearlings to be sold this fall and Pat is seriously thinking of

selling his semen freezing equipment, if he can.

"If there's a certain amount of value left in it, I can use that money for paying off debts that I've incurred because of the amount of money that I've lost over the last few years," he said. "We'll continue to live there for as long as we can and just call it a nice place to live, without very many horses on the property anymore."

The consensus is that Ontario's breeders immediately took the brunt of the blow from the SARP cancellation that removed more than 60 percent of the province's purses and left breeders with yearlings worth less than half of what they were the year before. The investment in those horses was made at least three years prior, meaning the financial losses were particularly acute.

going through this is unfathomable."

The couple had to let seven full-time employees go. There's only one employee left and she's only there because, "quite frankly, with both of us working now, we can't maintain the place ourselves," Pat said.

His last direct tie to Standardbreds is as the track veterinarian for Grand River Raceway in Elora. But even that job has been cut back. The track is running 14 fewer race dates this year than last—49 down from 63.

Pat's dream to own a breeding farm was first nurtured in 1986 when he started a two-year equine reproduction residency at Texas A&M University. He spent the next two decades in practice—including a three-year stint as the vet for Seelster Farms—as well as some time in

"That was the most unpleasant and awkward press conference that I've ever attended because of these forced smiles. It was pathetic."

Bruce Murray

Anna Meyers had a front-row seat to the devastation. When SARP was canceled, she was the president of the Standardbred Breeders of Ontario Association (SBOA). Today, the SBOA is suing the Ontario government for \$65 million in damages and Anna is out of the Standardbred game entirely. She is now the agricultural liaison officer with the Halton region, close to where the farm is located.

"At some point, you have to take a critical look and decide whether you are willing to watch everything you've worked hard for disappear and insist on staying this course and losing your home and your ability to provide for your family," Anna wrote in an e-mail. "Or you alter your course in life to enable you and your family to survive. We certainly understand how others have had to make the same difficult decision. The stress of

academia at his and Anna's alma mater, the University of Guelph. Anna has an undergraduate degree in agriculture and a master's degree in animal science. She has worked as an equine nutritionist for Shur-Gain and a marketing manager in the animal health division of pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim.

"We built up things together," Pat said of Emerald Ridge. "She's as much responsible for building up the farm as anybody."

This year, Pat will turn 60 and celebrate the 30th anniversary of his graduation from the University of Guelph's Ontario Veterinary College.

While breeders have been hit the hardest by the demise of the slot program, Pat said veterinarians have also taken a huge blow. He said he's in touch with most of the equine practices in Ontario through his new job with Merck.



CLEAN BREAK:

Bruce Murray left harness racing after losing his job of 24 years at Woodbine Entertainment Group and is now a property manager.

let go with no compensation.

“They are not looking at it on the level of the individual. They are just looking at it as something they need to do, and to hell with the consequences.”

Bruce Murray: No Looking Back

COUNT BRUCE MURRAY AMONG THE MANY the sport of harness racing has lost and won't get back. The day he became a victim of the Woodbine Entertainment Group's (WEG) extensive cost-cutting moves, Murray made a clean break from the sport he had loved since he was a boy.

He hasn't been to a harness track since he was fired in February 2013. He hasn't watched a single harness race in more than a year.

“You have to transition and do it as quickly as possible because nobody waits for you. You have to do it,” Murray said emphatically. “There's not much time to think on your feet.”

Don't mistake that as bitterness. Sitting at a table on the deck of his home in a leafy subdivision of Guelph, Murray appeared at peace with his transition into property management in his hometown of Kincardine after nearly 24 years working for WEG, the last seven as the vice president of Standardbred racing.

“It's simply that my interests have changed,” he said with a shrug. “[Horse racing] doesn't put food on the table any longer and I've had to adjust and get immersed in other things to keep my livelihood going.”

In the weeks leading up to his firing, Murray sat on the opposite side of the table at WEG. He was part of the executive team charged with the unenviable task of telling people either the company could no longer afford to keep them or was changing them from salaried to hourly workers.

“It was extremely unpleasant because I knew exactly what people's reactions would be,” Murray said. “So, when it happened to me, it wasn't totally foreign, but I wasn't totally prepared either.”

He said he was “very numb for some time” after receiving the news and spent a week in Florida with friends Steve Condren and Richard Young to

“I've had two surgical referral practices close the doors and quit because they can't make enough money,” Pat said. “Everybody is complaining that their incomes are down by 50 percent. There's a lot of doom and gloom.”

Pat knows that despondency well. He said the worst part of watching his

dream die is not being able to quit on his terms.

“The government is supposed to be looking out for people who are working hard and contributing to the economy,” he said. “Then to be unceremoniously dismissed, it's like someone who has been with a company for a long time that gets

decompress and play golf.

Murray was one of 109 employees WEG fired during the dark winter of 2012-'13, including fellow vice president Andrew MacDonald, who headed the company's strategic initiatives department. The mass dismissals came less than a year after the Liberals announced the cancelation of SARP and two months before the program officially came to an end.

That the fallout from the end of SARP reached all the way to the executive ranks of Canada's largest racetrack outfit was a particularly troubling sign in a horse racing sector the Ontario Horse Racing Industry Association (OHRIA) estimates has shed 9,000 jobs since SARP ended. That the end of the profitable program claimed Murray, one of the best liked, longest-tenured racing executives in the province, put a human face on the statistics and proved few were immune from the impact.

While Murray isn't particularly resentful about his own situation, understandably he does hold some bitterness toward the provincial government he believes caused unnecessary harm to people when it ended a program that was profitable for all parties—the government most of all. Before SARP ended, it was annually contributing \$1.1 billion in profits to the provincial coffers.

"There's always going to be people who are in a far worse position than I was going to experience and those are the people I felt for the most, and still do to this day," he said. "I think how they've been treated has been deplorable. They are the ones that are reeling still."

The WEG job cuts were a direct result of a transitional aid deal the company reached with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) in January 2013 for funding to sustain live racing at WEG tracks for two years.

Murray attended the press conference announcing the deal that, just two weeks later, led to his termination. It was held in the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame section of Woodbine Racetrack and some of the politicians and bureaucrats from the same government that canceled SARP were congratulating

themselves for saving the horse racing industry.

"That was the most unpleasant and awkward press conference that I've ever attended because of these forced smiles," Murray said. "It was pathetic."

He said his father, Don, who has owned Standardbreds for more than 40 years, is also essentially out of the game.

"With what the government has done, Dad is down to his last horse," Bruce said. "He doesn't seem to have the same enthusiasm after what's gone on."

Bruce's love of horse racing was first nurtured by his father and stoked as an

"There's no new blood. It used to be a buddy of a buddy, thinking that [buying a horse] was a good deal. Now, no one has a buddy of a buddy."

Jason Libby

early schoolmate of Don and Dean Wall, the sons of Canadian Hall of Fame driver Dave Wall. Bruce kept following the sport while pursuing degrees in radio and television broadcasting at Seneca College and business at Laurier University.

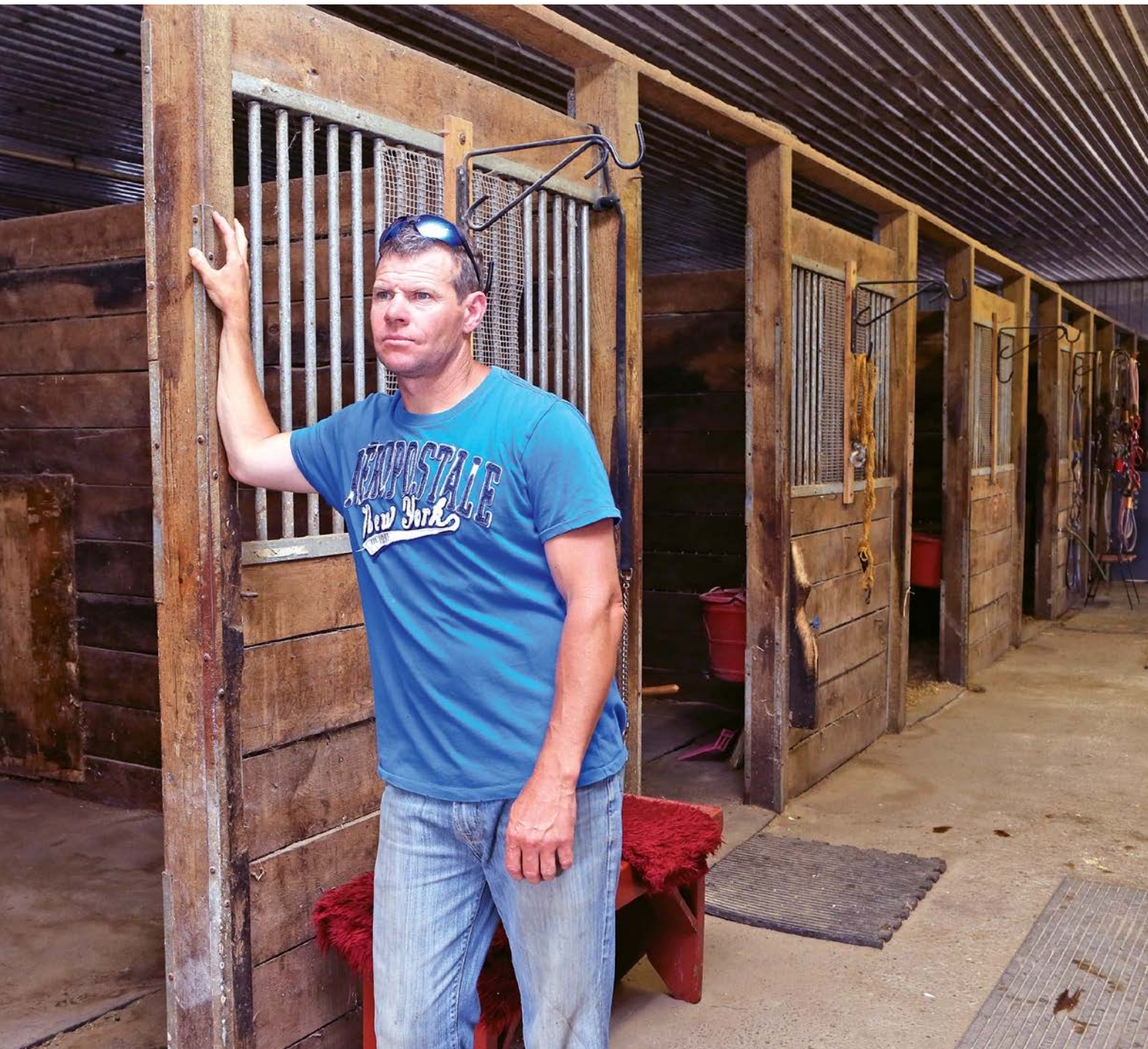
"I never dreamt that I was going to work in the business until my last year at Laurier," Murray said. "I actually wanted to be a hockey referee."

He pauses to watch Jasper, his 6-year-

PLAN B: More than half of the 98 stalls at Jason Libby's Dorchester Downs Training Centre now stand empty; the trainer is considering turning the facility into an equestrian center.



old Whoodle (wheaten terrier/poodle mix) earnestly scan the trees for squirrels, ready to strike at any sign of movement. It is a big, beautiful, blue summer day awash in sunshine. There are cookies and lemonade on the table provided by his wife, Nadine. Murray, looking relaxed in jeans and a golf shirt, still has the appearance of someone much younger than 49, though recent years have brought a touch of age to his face.



It's hard to believe he was hired by WEG (it was called the Ontario Jockey Club in those days) in the late 1980s. Over the next quarter-century, Bruce worked his way up from a position in the Standardbred publicity office to one of the top jobs on the harness side of the business in Canada.

Today, he manages four small commercial and multi-residential buildings in Kincardine he invested in back in 2008.

"I thought that it was a good, long-term investment for our retirement years," he said. "It was not something that I planned on working at this soon."

After leaving WEG, Murray enrolled in an online property management course he completed in nine months. Today, he makes the one hour and 40 minute commute from Guelph to Kincardine on Monday mornings and usually stays until Thursday evening. On Fridays, he

does the books and pays bills from home.

While the commute can be a challenge and he can be called to Kincardine at any time to address a problem—"You can have a tap leaking or someone's toilet needs fixing, or you can have a water leak somewhere," he said—Murray said he prefers his life now, particularly having most nights and weekends free. For the first time since his kids—Julia, 13, and Adam, 10—were born he can

regularly attend their sports events and other activities.

Murray said Nadine took the news of his dismissal from WEG harder than he did.

“There was a certain amount of resentment over the years for the amount of functions that I missed because of my work and I always considered myself to be fortunate to be in a job that I truly loved, so I didn’t see it in the same light as she did,” he said.

WEG made a career-transition firm available to Bruce, but he quickly felt better off “muddling through” on his own.

“When I look at these career-counseling firms, maybe they resonate with some people, but there’s a lot of sizzle and not a lot of steak,” he said.

As for the old harness racing crowd, he said he misses some of the people, but he’s not about to look back. Not for one second.

“I was in that business for so long,” he said. “I had a passion for horse racing growing up and was fortunate enough to work in an industry that I loved from a young age.

“Now, I’ve turned the page.”

Jason Libby: ‘Living a Nightmare’

IT WASN’T ALL THAT LONG AGO THAT LIFE was good for Jason Libby.

Just three years ago, in fact, there was a waiting list to get one of the 98 stalls at his Dorchester Downs Training Centre east of London, Ont. Today, after Ontario’s horse racing industry was blindsided by the cancellation of SARP, less than half of the stalls are full, the clock is running out and Libby, 45, is down to one final, desperate Hail Mary to save the place he bought eight years ago as his retirement plan.

“If it doesn’t work, it’s an all-out failure,” Libby said, leaning against a black paddock fence near his house as the training activity trickled to a halt for the day. There’s a shocking lack of resentment in his voice, despite the fact he doubts he could recoup his initial investment in today’s climate if he was forced to sell Dorchester Downs.

“My Plan B is to run an equestrian



SILENT SCENE: The now-deserted dorms at Mohawk Racetrack were home to former caretaker Bob Coole for nearly 22 years.

center and put [an indoor] riding ring in. I’ve got the space, I’ve got the stalls. It seems like their business and their horse population isn’t going anywhere.”

Eight years ago, Libby, then a successful young trainer, stretched himself to the limit by securing \$1.5 million to buy the

training center from Merv Smith. Libby started with a simple, reasonable premise: use Dorchester Downs as a long-term investment by living off his training revenue and using the rent from the other tenants to slowly pay off the place.

“When we bought it, we bought it

thinking we were not going to have a bad day," he said. "All the money was just changing hands from the stall to the bank. We weren't making a whole lot of money, but at least we were showing a little bit of profit."

When Libby and his wife first moved in, he was training 30 horses, they had a baby on the way and they were living their dream on a 50-acre green oasis.

"Now, I'm living a nightmare," Libby said.

Today, Libby is divorced, he is training just five horses and he has made

so. Libby said Before Trailers, the local manufacturer, hasn't sold a single unit to a Standardbred customer in more than 2½ years.

With purses and race dates cut drastically at the province's smaller tracks, two things happened to affect the number of possible tenants at Dorchester Downs: Many people have simply left the sport in Ontario and the number of horses breeders are producing has dropped sharply.

"One big stable left to go to the States. They were renting a whole barn, 26 stalls," Libby said. "He saw that

"I'm lucky; I have a great father and stepdad," Libby said. "My mom and stepdad come and they are big morale boosters. I have a couple of great clients that I talk to daily, who come out here and they are just cheerleaders. They know that I don't want to give up. They see Tyler and his buddies and they know."

So, it's now on to Plan B. OHRIA provided Libby with a business plan to turn part of the operation into an equestrian center.

"I could have riding horses out of this barn," he said, pointing and smiling, his eyes twinkling at the mere thought of the training center being full again. "And there's 26 acres of pasture up there. I could plop a riding arena up there. I've got a barn. I've got paddocks and pastures. I've got my infield if I wanted to have an outdoor ring for jumps. The land is here."

Libby went to university and has a diploma in social work, "but that was so long ago. I don't think that was thought out too well."

Instead, after working with horses most of his adult life, Libby only truly knows how to do one thing: put his head down, keep grinding and try to remain optimistic, praying all the while for a little luck.

"There's not a 'for sale' sign on the front of the place just yet," he said.

"I've got to know at least two dozen people that are not in the industry anymore and they're doing what they can to survive."

Bob Coole

just 13 starts this year while working day and night to try to keep the farm afloat mostly for his 7-year-old son—a blonde, mop-haired, sports-crazy boy named Tyler.

"Ninety-five percent of the reason why I'm fighting for it is because of him," he said. "It's a phenomenal place to grow up. We've got 50 acres to run around on. His buddy comes over and they play road hockey, baseball and soccer. And when he grows up, he can cut the grass and have a summer job."

Truth is, Libby could use the help.

"We let the maintenance guy go," he said. "Now I'm doing it all: chief cook, bottle washer, track man, grass cutter, horse trainer, electrician, plumber."

In the winter, he often wakes up in the middle of the night to work the track and keep it from freezing.

Dorchester Downs is located in a prime spot adjacent to the busy 401 highway that is thick at all hours with trucks and other vehicles. Too bad fewer of them are transporting Standardbred racehorses these days. Those that do are using older trucks and trailers to do

things weren't going to work out and away he went."

Basically, just the diehards remain, Libby said, and they're training fewer horses.

"There's no new blood," he said. "I don't remember the last time there was a new owner that showed up here. It used to be a buddy of a buddy of a buddy, thinking that [buying a horse] was a good deal. Now, no one has a buddy of a buddy."

He walks into one barn and shakes his head at a row of empty stalls.

"There's 50 empty stalls," Libby said. "It's hard. Damn."

Training centers everywhere are suffering, but particularly those such as Dorchester Downs, located a little farther from the Mohawk/Toronto epicenter and farther into the hinterland where the grassroots side of the sport took the biggest hit from the end of SARP. Libby said the nearby Putnam Training Centre has closed and the Dorchester Fairgrounds has half the horses it once did. Even lowering the price for stalls at Dorchester Downs didn't help.

Bob Coole: End of the Simple Life

BOB COOLE WHEEZES AS HE SLOWLY CLIMBS the steps that lead from the ground to the second-floor balcony of the abandoned dormitory in the deserted backstretch of Mohawk Racetrack. He's having a little trouble getting around these days, but he doesn't complain. Instead, he silently shakes his head as he stares at the thick layer of rust threatening to claim the metal staircase at the place he called home for the better part of 22 years.

The concrete walkways are rust-stained, the paint is peeling everywhere and the windows are covered with grime. Though the guts of the cement-block structure still look remarkably solid, there has been significant cosmetic decay

in a little more than a year since WEG shuttered the dorms. The last resident moved out some six months after WEG closed the rest of the backstretch in a bid to cut costs in the wake of the cancellation of SARP.

"It's just amazing, the degradation of what I'm seeing here," Coole said. "Everything is falling apart and nothing is taken care of. It's just a shame."

Coole was one of the last to leave the dorms when they were closed in May 2013, which is fitting since he was one of the first to move into the building when it opened in 1991, the same year he arrived from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, looking to restart his life.

Today, the career caretaker, a teddy bear of a man who will turn 55 the week before Halloween, shares a two-bedroom apartment in nearby Guelph with a friend. Coole was one of the lucky ones. Not everyone that lived in the dorms has landed on their feet.

"Not all good stories," he said quietly, declining to elaborate.

Though spartan, the Mohawk dorms

were a clean, affordable, relatively well-maintained place to live for those who devoted their lives to caring for horses. For \$400 a month, one could have a room to himself. WEG charged \$200 a month for anyone who shared a room.

"It had what you needed," Coole said. "Everything was included: lights, heat and everything you wanted to watch on television. You had your own washroom, not like the good old days when you had the tack room and one washroom with eight different tack rooms using it.

"You couldn't have a regular stove and that, but you made do," he said. "You had a George Foreman Grill or a slow cooker to make a nice stew."

Coole is one of nine children raised in Sydney, N.S. He remembers cutting through Tartan Downs racetrack on his way to school each morning, though, initially, he pursued business, not horses. He earned a degree in accounting and business management and eventually landed a job on the management team in a department store. He threw it all away in 1991 after a series of

traumatic events, started by his father's death due to ALS.

"Everything hit me at once," he remembered. "Dad died. I became separated from my wife and then my mom got sick. I went home and took care of my mom. On June 15, 1991, my mom died and my divorce became final. It wasn't a good day."

By August of that year, he had moved to Ontario to work with horses.

For more than two decades, Coole was happy in Ontario doing what he loved, despite the long hours, early mornings and simple life.

"How does that song go, 'Peaceful, Easy Feeling'?" Coole asked with a wink and a toothy grin framed by a gray handlebar moustache. "I was an assistant manager and manager of a department store for six years. It was 12 hours of stress."

Horses, even the difficult ones, are a different matter entirely, he said.

"Horses aren't high strung by nature," Coole said. "Horses want to be respected. In the end, the trainer doesn't

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Coole has cared for talented horses for John Burns, John Kopas, Blair Burgess and other top trainers, but developed a particularly close bond with trotting mare Lady Rainbow, who earned some \$800,000 for trainer, driver and part-owner Rick Zeron from 2010 to 2011.

"She was just a [baby]," Coole said. "She loved her carrots, so every day I'd make sure I had carrots for her. She would put her head on my shoulder, I'd put a carrot in my mouth and she'd just take it in her mouth."

Peering through the dirty window of room 115 where he lived for the last six years, Coole motions a meaty hand toward the row of first-floor dorm rooms.

"This was like the senior citizens' section," he said with a thick chuckle. "All the older people lived in this end, so it was pretty good. The young kids were upstairs on the other side. It was fun."

Except the night of April 2, 1992,

when Barn 3 caught fire and 69 horses died a short distance from the Mohawk dorm. At that time, Coole worked for trainer Len Lalonde Jr., who lost his entire stable of 13 horses in the blaze.

"I still remember seeing the first smoke at quarter after one in the morning," he said. "Everybody pulled every fire alarm between here and there and the firemen had to stop Lennie from running in to save his horses. I still remember some of the horses we had in there, including Neat Touch, who was a full brother to Staying Together. He was a great little horse, all heart."

That the dorms opened the year before the fire may have saved some human lives. No one was sleeping in a tack room in Barn 3 the night it caught fire.

Today, the Mohawk backstretch that was once a vibrant village is eerily quiet. The horses are gone, the wildlife is quickly taking over and the dorms are empty. Many of its former residents have simply disappeared from the horse racing industry.

"I've got to know at least two dozen people that are not in the industry anymore and they're doing what they can to survive," Coole said.

He remembers there being a knot in his throat as he took a long last look in the rearview mirror the day he moved out, but insists he will get by, somehow.

"I've always been a glass-is-half-full kind of guy," he said. "I'm fortunate that I can do almost anything. This year I've done 30, 40 sets of income taxes. If they can afford it, they pay me. Seven or eight of them, I know they can't afford it. I've been treasurer of the racetrack chaplaincy association for four or five years now. That's the way I was brought up. If you can help somebody, you help somebody."

Coole's life plan is simple. He wants to work with horses as long as he can.

"As long as my rent's paid and my belly's full, that's all that counts," he said.

Dave Briggs is a freelance writer living in Ontario. | To comment on this story, e-mail us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.

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