

MYSTERY HAUNTS HORSE LOVERS



Fearing for the safety of the remaining 22 horses, horse trainer Robert Krcmar shipped them to undisclosed locations across York Region.

It's been more than a year since four horses were shot in a Whitchurch-Stouffville barn

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer

It is, indeed, an unsolved mystery. Why would anyone gun down two horses, only to return a month later and shoot two more?

Eighteen months ago marked a difficult time for York Region's horse community. But for horse trainer Robert Krcmar, it was devastating.

"I couldn't imagine going through anything like it again," Krcmar said.

The 34-year-old made the first gruesome discovery in late December 1998. The morning started like any other at Greenwinds Farms of Bloomington, near Hwy. 48 in Stouffville, where Krcmar tended to 26 horses.



Det. Dave Trach of York Regional Police inspected the scene.

Entering the barn for a morning ritual of feeding and watering, Krcmar spotted Guinness first. It was a horrifying sight. The three-year-old gelding was alive, but in bad shape. The horse had taken a bullet to the face.

The horse trainer was paralyzed with fear. He was bewildered, and most of all, he was sad. Krcmar knew the shooting would devastate Guinness' owner Jason Morris, a 10-year-old North York boy. He asked himself, "Who would shoot a kid's horse?"

Close by was Chance. The stallion, owned by Schomberg veterinarian Dr. Dom Zerajic, had also been shot in the face.

Krcmar ran to the telephone and called 911, but it was too late.

When Zerajic learned his horse was bleeding from a gunshot wound, he reacted with intense anger. A horse lover his entire life, Zerajic couldn't comprehend why anyone would commit such a brutal act.

Both horses were rushed to an animal hospital at the University of Guelph, where a medical team determined the injuries were too grave to save their lives. Guinness and Chance were put to sleep. But not before Debbie Robinson drove her son to Guelph to say goodbye to Guinness.

TRAGEDY STRUCK AGAIN

Toughing Canada's cruelty to animal laws may help, "but first you have to catch the bastard," Zerajic said. "I still think sooner or later, something will happen and an arrest will be made."

"This is the 21st century and animals must be respected," Zerajic. "God gave us a brain to think. It is not there to be cruel."

A month after Chance and Guinness died, tragedy struck again. Krcmar walked into the barn, only to find Lucy, a nine-year old grey mare had been shot to death.

A closer examination showed Lucy had a bullet lodged in her head. Blood was everywhere. Five stalls away, Krcmar found Mr. Chips, a five-year old bay gelding. He was alive but bleeding profusely from the nose and head. Of the four injured horses, only Mr. Chips survived.

Lucy belonged to a Markham teenager. She loved riding and she especially loved Lucy. "My daughter hasn't been on a horse since," said John Cranfield. "She'll never ride again. She can just barely talk about it."

Not a day goes by that Cranfield doesn't think about the day Lucy was shot in cold blood.

"I envision the gun pointing at her. I envision her lying there bleeding to death. We have to make sure this never happens again," Cranfield said.

Jason Morris has resumed riding and has a new horse. However, nothing will ever

replace his Guinness.

"You have to carry on. I lost Guinness and I lost a lot of money. There was no insurance," he said.

The shootings shocked the local horse community. A reward, valued at \$50,000, was established. But it was never claimed. "We'd hoped that it would make someone talk," Cranfield said.

At the time of the shootings, York Regional Police reached out to the public to help solve the crime. The case attracted many calls, allowing detectives to speak with about 50 people.

"We thought we had a suspect, but it didn't pan out," Det. Gary McBrien said.

With two shootings back to back, people worried a horse-hating madman was on the loose.

But police believed it wasn't a random act.

HUNCHES AREN'T ENOUGH

"It was isolated and it was the same shooter in both cases," McBrien said. "It will likely never happen again."

While McBrien insists the case is far from closed, Krcmar doesn't think police put a high priority on the killings.

"If it was a person, I think the (police) response would have been different. They would have used every resource available," Krcmar said.

But McBrien argues the investigation was thorough. "And, it's still going on. I am available to talk to anyone about it."

The police might have a hunch that points to a particular suspect. But hunches aren't enough, McBrien said.

"This case is still open. But there is no activity at this time. It's a mystery. I'm optimistic that an arrest will be made. Everyone has one of these on the books. I've been a police officer for 28 years. I'd like to see this one cleared up. Somebody out there knows something. I'd like to think their conscience would get to them."

Meanwhile, Krcmar believes the police know who shot the horses, but don't have enough evidence to make an arrest.

A day after the second shooting, Krcmar moved the horses to unspecified locations out of concern for their safety.

The killings tore out Krcmar's heart, forcing him to avoid his life's work for the next year.

"I couldn't. I just didn't want to be around them. It's better now," Krcmar said.

Greenwinds Farms is up for sale, while Krcmar trains horses some- where else in York Region.

Meanwhile, the federal government is expected to pass a new law linked to cruelty to animals.

Currently, anyone convicted under animal cruelty laws faces a maximum two-year prison term, a \$2,000 fine and possible probation.

Under the new law, anyone convicted could be jailed for five years, be forced to make a cash payment to a humane society, face an additional fine and be banned from ever owning an animal.

But there's a catch to tougher laws, Krcmar said.

"It doesn't matter how a law reads, if you don't enforce it and come up with criminal charges, it's useless."

In the meantime, McBrien's horse-shooting file is open.

"The trouble is the witnesses were horses and the victims were horses. Horses don't talk."



Horse trainer Robert Krcmar was devastated.

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