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Horse's Spirit Lives Through Equestrian Center

HONORING ANIMAL'S MEMORY: ☒ Larry Hewitt Busy Lobbying Lawmakers

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Adam Amato ☒/ The Chronicle

The spirit behind the Southwest Regional Equestrian Center is rooted in the worst moment in Larry Hewitt's life.

The horse was named Tahoma, a skinny, bony Arabian Hewitt bought after he saw her in an ad. Still, Hewitt recognized the horse had heart, and he rode her in a national championship equestrian event.

A year and a half ago, Hewitt took Tahoma to ride some trails outside Battle Ground. In the evening, Hewitt went up to feed her. The horse turned quickly, then fell awkwardly. Hewitt rushed to help her, then recognized Tahoma had broken her hip. He and some

Larry Hewitt, project manager of the Southwest Regional Equestrian Center, runs his horse, Andee, through exercises at his Centralia home Friday morning.

friends tried to hold the horse down, but the horse stood up again, further injuring herself.

Finally, unable to withstand the pain, Tahoma crashed to the ground again. She had died within five minutes of the break, Hewitt said. He called it "the most devastating moment of my life."

BUT HEWITT WANTS to make sure her memory lives on. The logo of the Regional Equestrian (REQ) Center, which is depicted on Hewitt's business card, features a drawing of mountains meant to look like the Cascades. But upon second glance, the edge of the mountain becomes a nose, and the gap between the peaks an eye. It's a picture of Tahoma's head, and a reminder for Hewitt.

"This whole project is based around that horse, and the spirit she had," he said.

THESE DAYS, Hewitt is spending a lot of time up in Olympia, lobbying lawmakers for what has suddenly and unexpectedly become an economic-development cause for Lewis County since the TransAlta coal mine closed in late

Biography

Name: Larry Hewitt

Age: 54

Hometown: Centralia

Occupation: Project manager for Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian Center

Family: Wife, Rhonda; three children, two grandchildren, four Sudanese foster children

Hobby: Horseback riding

Favorite food: Artichokes

Favorite TV program: Survivor

November. Sporting his off-white Stetson hat, boots and bolo tie, Hewitt stands out from most other lobbyists. But that doesn't mean he's a natural cowboy.

Born and reared in Marysville, Hewitt's background is in sports marketing and computer networking. In the late 1980s, Hewitt was the season ticket manager for the Tacoma Starzz, a professional soccer team.

In the '90s, just as the Internet was beginning to boom, Hewitt took a job designing the Web site for then-Secretary of State Ralph Munro that kept track of the vote tallies for the elections and made them available to the public.

Then, 10 years ago, Hewitt started his own Internet consulting firm with a partner, and he's been running that until about a year ago, when drumming up support for the equestrian center became a full-time gig.

The love of horses came from his wife, Rhonda, who grew up with them. The couple were living in Lakewood when she first brought it up, and Hewitt admitted he was skeptical at first.

"I said, 'You're nuts. We live in a suburb,'" he said.

Eventually, though, he gave in, and he grew to love the horses. He now owns two: Gladdy, a gray half-Arab and half-quarter-horse, and Andee, a chestnut mare of unknown breed.

"It's really quite a revolutionary experience," he said of owning the horses.

IT'S BEEN an experience with the Legislature as well. A bill to support the center, sponsored by Rep. Gary Alexander, R-Olympia, recently had a hearing in committee and has met with little opposition. Hewitt said Anchor Bank has also provided the REQ Center group with a full-time consultant, Bill Jones, to help with some of the financing.

One thing Hewitt said he's not doing is using the equestrian center as a springboard for his own political ambitions. In early 2006, he sought the Lewis County Commission seat vacated by Eric Johnson as a Democrat, and he currently serves as a member of the county's planning commission.

But he points to the support he's had from Commissioner Ron Averill, the Republican who currently holds the seat in his district, and he doesn't see how he could make a challenge.

"I can't in good faith ask people to do what they've done, and turn around and run against them," Hewitt said.

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