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## NBC Case Study: Burned Horse's Spirit Not Broken

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# Burned Horse's Spirit Not Broken

BY KELLY STRATTON

In looking back, Frances (Fran) Wade-Whittaker gets emotional.

"I cried every day for a month," said Fran about her handsome Oldenburg mare Suki, who, nine months ago was the victim of a barn fire. "I cried just thinking of what she must have gone through that night. It's heart-wrenching."

On July 10, 2009, a fire broke out in a boarding facility in Oley Township, PA. Although the horses in the barn were set free, Suki was spooked and ran back into the burning barn. Fire fighters got the horse out a second time and she took off with another horse. "The fire fighters couldn't find them. There was nothing I could do; I just paced all night," said Fran.

Measuring about 17 hands high and weighing approximately 1,460 pounds, Suki was found in a nearby pasture, badly burned. After consultation with Fran's local veterinarian, Suki was loaded up and taken to New Bolton Center's George D. Widener Hospital for Large Animals where the horse was seen by Dr. Kelly Kalf.

"Between 65 to 70 percent of her body was burned," said Dr. Kalf. "There was severe eschar and scabs from the burn along her back and her ears were stiff and blackened."

In addition to the eschar on her back and her burned ears, Suki's facial hair was gone, her eyes swollen shut, her head was hanging low and she had a rapid heart rate; she was in shock. The Emergency Services team tended to her and set her up in ICU where she received IV fluids, pain medication, antibiotics, anti-inflammatory medicine and topical ointments.

As soon as she could, Fran traveled to New Bolton Center. "In my initial meeting with Dr. Kalf I said, 'If she needs to be put down, tell me that.' And she said, 'No, no, no. We're going to give this a shot.' But I knew that the first 48 to 72 hours were going to be crucial."

"We didn't dissect the burn to determine the degree – whether they were first-, second- or third-degree – like they normally do right away in human medicine," said Dr. Kalf, "because we wanted to get her stabilized and keep any protective layers of skin in place."

Aside from the burns, the most alarming symptom to Dr. Kalf was Suki's developing nasal and head edema (swelling). One of the biggest immediate concerns was how much smoke and soot inhalation damage there was – and whether or not Suki would require a tracheotomy or develop life-threatening pulmonary edema or pneumonia.

Another concern was her eyes, which were swollen shut. She had corneal ulcers in both due to thermal injury, which resolved with treatment. "Even after the ulcers healed, we were worried that her corneas might not be getting the lubrication they needed, but, once the swelling subsided a bit, she was able to open and close her eyelids normally, which provided enough lubrication to the corneas with the tear film," said Dr. Kalf. By the time she was discharged, Suki was able to open and close her eyes normally.

"After the first 48 to 72 hours, when she'd lifted her head and was eating, she never looked back," said Dr. Kalf, "and her attitude was good and strong."

Despite living more than an hour away, Fran visited Suki four days a week. "I needed for her to know I was



Fran and Suki, three months after Suki's saddle-breaking at three years of age.



Three weeks after the barn fire, Suki's skin begins to slough off and needs constant care.

there,” she said. “Each day, she was doing better. The first time I saw her, her eyes were swollen shut. The second day, they’d already started to open. And through it all, she was always Suki, the diva, being a little pushy and prissy.”

### Apples, Molasses and Gummy Bears

An integral component of Suki’s treatment was the care she received in ICU. Because of the severity of her burns on her head, face and neck, Suki couldn’t wear a halter and administering oral medication was challenging.

“The ICU was a good location for Suki because there’s round-the-clock care,” said Dr. Kalf. “The nurses and residents are on top of the cases more than anyone else and can say, ‘This changed in the last hour. This changed over night. She’s not responding to this.’ And they knew exactly how to administer drugs since Suki’s head couldn’t be touched and she couldn’t wear a halter.”

The team used apples, molasses and gummy bears to administer Suki’s medications.

Slowly, Suki’s burned skin began to slough off revealing new hair growth, indicating her burns were first- and second-degree. Throughout her stay at Widener Hospital, Suki’s wounds were treated topically and Dr. Kalf regularly conducted wound debridements, a process by which dead, damaged or infected skin or tissues are removed in order to promote new growth.

“The doctors and nurses were so amazing,” said Fran. “They went above and beyond, they were kind, attentive and that felt good. I knew she was getting the best care.”

After 47 days at Widener Hospital, the horse had made enough progress to be released to the lay-up facility where she continues to heal.

### “I Feel Pretty”

While Kelly Buss had worked with recovering horses before, she’d never met a horse like Suki. Suki was high-maintenance, requiring early-morning, late-evening and all-day attendance. Kelly’s barn is where Suki continues her recovery after release from Widener Hospital.

“I’ve seen a lot of gorgeous sunrises thanks to Suki,” said Kelly. Because Suki could not be out in the sun, Kelly would administer the horse’s early morning medications, let her outside until sunrise and then bring her back in for the duration of the day. “I’d let her back outside when the sun would just pass the barn. She loves being out there.”

Only 15 minutes away, Fran visits often. “Kelly has really done more for Suki than I could have ever asked,” said Fran.

“I kept a log of what I did so that Fran could be sure we were getting done what we needed to,” said Kelly. “But, what started out as a list of when I gave medicine, fed her, let her outside, became more of a journal.”

Kelly pulls out the log. From simply jotting down the duties of the day, Kelly has gotten more descriptive. From writing about sunrises to reflecting on how Suki must feel and singing her songs like “I Feel Pretty,” Suki has had an influence on her caretaker.

“She’s just such a special horse,” said Kelly. “She’s so graceful. She’s been through something you don’t ever dream of and she has still maintained the sassiness that Fran talks about. It’s just amazing.”

Suki’s daily care has steadily lessened in intensity. While it’s still uncertain whether she’ll be able to be ridden again doesn’t much matter to Fran. “She’s still my Suki. My diva, sassy Suki.” 🍷



Dr. Bill Gilson, resident, Dr. Kelly Kalf and Dr. Joan Norton, resident, say their goodbyes on Suki’s day of discharge from Widener Hospital.



Fran visits Suki at Kelly’s layup facility in Fleetwood, PA as the horse continues her recovery.