

Equestrian schools find slight hope in phase one

By Robert Belardi

To say the COVID-19 pandemic has been a wild ride for equestrian facilities across Ontario might just be an understatement. Equestrian schools have continued to incur heavy losses and without adequate support from the Canadian government, the road was going to continue heading further south. King City's Raynham Stables, owned by Nicole Maclellan and her family, have been avidly seeking ways to survive. When the state of emergency rustled into action before March break, Raynham stables braced for impact. Who else saw this coming? The barn had just exhausted all of its expenses into a renovation in the winter. The credit line is completely maxed out. There's no turning back now. The business incurs a monthly overhead of \$40,000 at full operation. Maclellan has had to lay off all but one of her employees to reduce the wages and struggled to pay February's salaries. Wages, hay (which costs \$5,000 a month on its own), grain, shaving, and veterinarian tack on to the monthly bill as well. She has managed to incur a loss of only \$15,000 a month, in care of 44 horses on the property. Almost immediately, a fund was created. "We knew pretty quickly we were going to be in a bad situation. We sent out an email to all of our clients, explaining that we were shut down and what that meant to us," Maclellan explained. Raynham Stables began a "Sponsor a Schoolie" campaign to raise money for all of the horses. There is a bio of each horse online on the website that people can sponsor. Maclellan says if it wasn't for this, she doesn't know where the barn would be. Generous clients have opted to donate funds to support the stable. Former employees have volunteered to work for free to aid the family. The barn has been operating at a loss for months. Equestrian facilities make small profits per year and almost always, incur losses throughout the winter. Raynham Stables offers their services in sessions. From March break to June is the spring session. From July until August is where the summer camp rolls around and from September until either November or December is the final months to generate as much revenue as possible. The Maclellan family has received the Canada Emergency Business Account loan of \$40,000 from the government. That loan is now gone. Equestrian governing bodies in Ontario and nationally have cried for help. On CTV National News on May 13, Equestrian Canada Manager of Welfare and Industry, Kristy House said the equestrian community needs help now. According to CTV's Molly Thomas, Canada Revenue Agency defines farming as the care for race horses and not school horses. The government recently added \$125 million to the AgriRecovery Fund, none of which would be able to aid equestrian facilities. This fund would also only support 35% of horse farmers with a registered farm number, Thomas reported. According to Equestrian Canada, 36 percent of farmers are out of financial reserves and 50.1 per cent won't make it beyond a month of supplies. Maclellan says she has heard rumours that some farmers might face the heartbreaking reality of euthanizing some of the older horses. For her stables, she might have to consider selling a few of her own but with financial limitations plaguing the entire country, who would buy them? With gruelling affects and a daunting recovery process ahead for most equestrian businesses, the equestrian community received warming news last Thursday from Premier Doug Ford. Individual recreational sports and facilities that board animals for visits, feed and riding were given the infamous green light to reopen at a limited capacity, beginning this past Tuesday. Maclellan is unsure if that means holding private lessons but with respecting physical distancing and adhering to the provincial and federal governing bodies, she hopes this can be accomplished to have a chance at breaking even. "Our provincial and federal governing bodies have released a framework for returning to activities. We have to make sure we have a handwashing station at the entrance of the barn, we have to have a waiver and sign-in sheet at the entrance of the barn as well," Maclellan said. "We have to make sure that we are able to maintain physical distancing wherever, anyone would be in the same building at the same time." Among other regulations currently in place, Maclellan must reduce her capacity of clients and of staff in order to earn some income. If private lessons can be done, she plans to provide service to families who have previously paid in March. These families have left their payments with the barn without asking for a refund. Only then, in time, she hopes to bring group lessons back once things open up even further. With what was a long-term recovery process, may be reduced to a shorter amount of years from the effects of this COVID-19 pandemic. Maclellan believes this will be the most crucial aspect of her business, considering summer camp seems to be lost. If she can make some sort of income in the winter, then the recent construction made to her barn hasn't gone to waste. For now, this is a good first step.