

VETTING YOUR EQUINE

Charity

Tis the season of giving, but how can you tell where your gift will go the farthest?

By **Christina Keim**

The holiday season turns our thoughts to charitable giving, and for the equine lover there are no shortage of worthy organizations to support, from therapeutic riding programs to equine rescues to groups offering equestrian college scholarships.

As Sara Nason, spokesperson for Charity Navigator, a charity assessment organization based in Bergen County, New Jersey, says, “You want to support someone whose values align with yours.”

But once the money or item is out of your hands, is it possible to ensure that the donation will be used wisely? Or that the organization is doing the work they claim to be?

“Particularly today, with social media and the internet, it is pretty easy for someone to throw up a picture and set up a GoFundMe page,” says Lynn Coakley, president and founder of the EQUUS Foundation, a charity whose mission, in part, is to financially support organizations protecting horses and promoting their wellbeing. “It is really easy to appeal to the donor public.”

Let’s look at how to get the information you need to ensure the charity is the right fit for you.

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION 101

Many donations are given for purely altruistic reasons, but often donors are looking to receive a tax deduction in exchange for their gifts. Only those charities that have been granted 501(c)(3) status by the Internal Revenue Service can offer tax credit.

“There is a wide breadth of nonprofits in the U.S. and beyond,” says Nason. “One of the first questions we ask is

if they are a registered 501(c)(3) organization.”

To become a 501(c)(3), the entity must prove to the IRS that its charitable work is worthy of tax-exempt status. It must annually submit Form 990, documenting how its money is distributed among programs and staff, as well as details regarding the kinds of programs provided by the organization. If a donor requests a copy of Form 990, federal law requires the organization provide it.

One important note here is that a nonprofit organization usually has three to four months to file Form 990 after the conclusion of its fiscal year, which doesn’t always coincide with the calendar year. Requests for extension of up to six months are also common, meaning that when the form becomes publicly available during the next calendar year varies.

“It can take as long as a year for the Form 990 to appear,” says Nason. “But if it is the end of 2018, and you are only seeing the 990 from 2016, you should do more research.”

GETTING ANSWERS

Donors shouldn’t be shy about asking potential recipients for specifics about the organizations.

“Highly effective nonprofits should be able to answer questions like: What are your goals? What is your history of success? What are your needs right now? Do you have an effective way to get the money to the people and places that need it?” says Nason. “If they cannot answer these questions, you may want to go elsewhere.”

For those who don’t have time to do this kind of inquiry, groups like Charity Navigator or the EQUUS Foundation



Green Chimneys Children's Services, Inc., in Brewster, N.Y., is an EQUUS Foundation Guardian Charity and one of the many nonprofits that received a grant from the EQUUS Foundation this year to help with their equine-related work. *PHOTO COURTESY OF GREEN CHIMNEYS WWW.GREENCHIMNEYS.ORG/HOLIDAYS*

do the asking for you. Charity Navigator provides star ratings to nearly 2 million diverse nonprofits each year through the analysis of metrics ranging from financial management to accountability to transparency. Since its inception in 2011, the EQUUS Foundation has specialized in equestrian charities, verifying not just their legal status, but also that they care for horses in an ethical and responsible manner. The Equine Welfare Network lists more than 1,000 equine-oriented charities focusing on horse welfare. Those charities meeting the highest standards will be awarded the coveted Guardian Charity status.

"How we evaluate depends on the type of charity," says Coakley. "For example, when it comes to special needs organizations, we are all about the horse. If the horse is overused, it is not good. We focus on the care of the horse

and ask questions that are hard for donors to inquire about, like how many hours a day or days per week a horse works."

For groups providing rescue or sanctuary services, the Foundation evaluates their ability to retrain and rehome the horses that are accepted into the program as well as the condition and quality of life for horses in sanctuaries.

"We look at the horses they take in and evaluate their ages, breeds, how long the horses stay, and the rate of horses that return," says Coakley.

EQUUS Foundation staff will also consider the overall sustainability of an organization, including not just financial records but the board structure. "If an organization has been around a long time but is still run by mom and pop, it might not survive past the founders," says Coakley. "If the organization is using facilities

“There are many organizations doing fabulous work.”

—Lynn Coakley

owned by the founder, we look at the leasing arrangement and ask, ‘Is it fair?’ Or are there board members that may have a financial interest because they are a service provider?”

All groups start with a listing on the Horse Welfare Network; the EQUUS Foundation verifies that these groups have at least silver status on GuideStar, another national charity verification organization. Some groups are private foundations, while others are 501(c)(3) nonprofits. Guardian Charities commit to a more extensive evaluation by the Foundation, including close scrutiny of organizational structure, finances, horse care

practices, day-to-day operations and the qualifications of staff. More than 150 equine nonprofits have gone through the Guardian Charity selection process; the EQUUS Foundation will accept donations to these specific charities through their website. Donors can also give to the Foundation directly; each year, the organization offers grants to some of its Guardian Charities.

But Coakley cautions that there are still many worthy charities not yet a part of the EQUUS Foundation family.

“I don’t want to give the impression that Guardian Charities are the only good ones,” says Coakley. “There are charities that don’t know about us or haven’t completed the process to become a Guardian. There are many organizations doing fabulous work, and we know that there are top organizations not yet participating in our network.”

THE PRIVATE FOUNDATION PERSPECTIVE

A private foundation is a different type of charitable organization; while some are also 501(c)(3) charities, they are typically funded by an individual, family or other group. Private foundations allow the donor to control the mission, investment and disbursement of the funds collected within the foundation.

Professional equestrian and philanthropist Georgina Bloomberg is well known for her charitable work, both in and out of the equine world. Along with sister Emma

IT ISN'T ALL ABOUT THE MONEY

Professional equestrian and philanthropist Georgina Bloomberg is passionate about lending a helping hand, but she’s equally excited to encourage others to find the best way to do the same. And she wants to make one thing clear: You don’t have to give money to make a difference to people and animals in need.

“Your time is also important,” says Bloomberg. “I really believe that if I can do something to help someone, I should be doing it. So if what you can do is walk a dog at a shelter for 30 minutes a week, that is awesome. Whether it is giving your money or your time, I believe that everyone has the ability and obligation to do the most they possibly can.”

Sometimes being charitable simply means recognizing a specific need. In 2006, at the age of 23, Bloomberg

founded The Rider’s Closet, a charity that supplies clothing to children who want to ride. “Riding has been my passion, and I wanted to give back to a sport that has given me so much and so much opportunity,” says Bloomberg. “It was simple for me to do and something I saw a need for. It was a way to help those who loved the sport but couldn’t afford the attire.”

Bloomberg emphasizes that doing charitable work becomes its own reward. “That one person who says that what you did mattered to them—that keeps you going,” says Bloomberg. “You do it because the work is important, and it makes you feel like you are making a difference.”

Bloomberg recommends finding a cause about which you are really, truly passionate, and then do the most you can with whatever resources you have available. “Do something small,” she says. “Donate supplies you aren’t using. Or volunteer. Volunteers make a difference as much as donors.”

Bloomberg, Georgina founded the Emma and Georgina Bloomberg Foundation. Like any donor, the Foundation's board must assess potential recipients' worthiness for support, a daunting task in light of the volume of applications received.

"We get a lot of requests each year," says Georgina. "My sister is very involved in homelessness in New York City, and I am the animal person. To be funded by our foundation, [the organization] almost always has to be animal or New York oriented."

Keeping their recipients focused to those groups working within Emma and Georgina's main areas of interest helps to increase the effectiveness of their donations. The Emma and Georgina Bloomberg Foundation uses information similar to other charity assessment groups to determine which of the many applicants would most benefit from a donation.

"The No. 1 most important thing is that you must really care about the cause," says Georgina. "You only have a certain amount of money to give. You have to hope and assume that other people will care about those other causes and will help them."

The long-term success of any nonprofit organization depends upon the support of donors who believe in the cause. Whether the contribution is large or small, when given from the heart it shows a commitment to improving the lives of those around us.

"Our hope is that all horse lovers become horse protectors, and that means supporting those charities that help horses," says Coakley. "They are really good at doing what they do." 🐾



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