

A passion followed

Karen McGarrah uses the skills – and passion – she learned as a healthcare supply chain executive to help rescue horses

Supply chain management is in her blood. So are horses. That could explain why, following a 32-year career in healthcare supply chain management, Karen McGarrah now spends most days working with rescue horses in southern California.

Born in Columbus, Ga., McGarrah's father was a purchasing agent for a large construction company that built dams in the Southeast. The family moved regularly until Karen reached the fourth grade, when they settled down in Alabama.

She got her first full-time job at age 12 in order to pay for the upkeep of her horse. "My dad borrowed my first horse to see if I would take care of it," she says. "He ended up buying it for me six months later. The rest is history."

Healthcare career

McGarrah joined Baptist Health System in Birmingham in May 1981, as director of materials management for the hospital system's Montclair facility.

"Montclair was one of only four facilities in Baptist Health System at the time, and none of them had an internal materials management system,"

she says. "I was the first person hired in the Baptist system. It was my role to provide internal structure and establish the foundation of materials management for Baptist to build the future internal materials system. This included creating an infrastructure of communications and a systemic structure of internal partnerships within the corporate headquarters."

Over the years, Baptist expanded in size, encompassing many more hospitals. McGarrah grew with the organization as well, ultimately becoming vice president of shared services. "We had a great time at Baptist," she says today. "We were cutting edge, doing things others weren't doing," including innovative work with consultants medical/surgical distributors, and group purchasing organizations.

"I am most proud of being the leader of a seasoned team of veterans who were recognized nationally for their innovation," she says. "We had the full support of our CEO and senior vice president, and all of our accomplishments were as a team. We were the industry leaders of surgical innovations in addition to materials creation and functional areas. We established a company doing business locally for sterilized packs.



Karen McGarrah and Marigold.

Our laundry accommodated laundry for other facilities. We had an integumentary nurse for all our facilities. We had a PhD-prepared nurse who conducted all our clinical studies. We had a five-year strategic plan that was reviewed annually. We had so many things to be proud of as a team.”

Supplier side of healthcare

In January 1997, McGarrah jumped from the provider to the supplier side of the industry, joining IntePlex, a consulting company for Bergen Brunswig Corp., a national pharmaceutical and medical distributor. (The company’s medical unit was acquired by Cardinal Health in 2000. One year later, Bergen Brunswig Corp., the pharmaceutical wholesaler, merged with AmeriSource Health Corp. to form AmerisourceBergen Corp.)



Preparing red meal buckets.

IntePlex’s mission was to create a “one-stop shop” for hospitals, that is, a vendor that could bring both pharmaceuticals and medical supplies and equipment (product lines which, in the hospital supply chain, are traditionally carried by separate distributors).

In 2000, McGarrah made another big career move, joining Broadlane, a healthcare group purchasing organization (acquired by MedAssets Inc. in 2010). “Group purchasing was something I had not done in the past and was the missing link in my resume. I felt it would be a great opportunity for me to learn the last piece of my total trade of supply chain.”

In 2009, she became senior regional director for MedAssets Inc., a national group purchasing organization.

As such, she worked with senior vice presidents, regional directors of materials management and buyers, C-level executives, physician executives and others to promote use of the group purchasing contract portfolio and to drive savings for hospital participants. Then in September 2013, she switched gears.

The switch

While working for MedAssets (and living in Long Beach, Calif.), McGarrah began volunteering at Red Bucket Equine Rescue, which at the time was located in Huntington Beach.

A 501(c) 3 corporation, Red Bucket was founded in 2009, one year after founder Susan Peirce rescued a starving thoroughbred filly from a run-down stable, whose manager

stopped feeding her since he wasn’t being paid. Peirce bought 50 pounds of carrots and a red bucket, and fed the filly – whom she named Harlow – to health. In January 2009, she went to the same stable and found nine additional abandoned horses, one of whom subsequently died. Soon thereafter, she formed the non-profit organization. By May 2009, the rescue had grown from 9 horses to 71. As of May 2014, Red Bucket’s volunteer team had saved 249 horses and placed 131 of them in new homes.

In September 2013, McGarrah made one more major life/career decision. “I left healthcare because I decided it was time for me to spend my life serving our Red Bucket horses, which has become my passion,” she says. “Volunteering is very rewarding, and I wanted to spend more time with the horses that I love so much.” (Roughly two years ago, Red Bucket moved to Chino Hills. McGarrah followed, and now lives about five minutes from the rescue.)

Though she had left Alabama, years earlier, she never really left horses. In fact, she still owns a 60-acre farm in her home state, with 10 horses on it. “I have never been without a horse since I was a kid,” she says. She still gets back to the ranch three or four times a year.

Learning to trust

“Although I am in a volunteer position, I spend more time at the ranch than I spent on the job, and I spent a great deal more than 40 hours a week working,” she says. “I am at the ranch seven days a week working with the horses and volunteers. I am probably in the best health of my life. The ranch is 4.3 acres, and I walk it from end to end many times per day.

“The horses we serve come to us abused by humans and have no reason to ever trust humans again. The mission of Red Bucket is ‘To save and rehabilitate horses, restore their trust in humankind, and find them safe, loving, permanent, adoptive homes.’ This is what we do every day. What is more worthy of my time and talent than this mission in life?”

As volunteer ranch coordinator, McGarrah manages all ranch maintenance and projects, including:

- Managing the volunteers for special ranch projects, stable service day, ranch care, cleaning of feed buckets, polo wraps, stall pipes, Sunday stall cleaning, water buckets, store rooms, painting, and overall ranch repair.
- Managing vendors and volunteer specialists, such as electricians, plumbers and ranch care donations.
- Helping keep the ranch clean.
- Helping repair items for horses.
- Supporting the overall maintenance, bedding, water bowls, and safety of the Red Bucket horse stalls.
- Overseeing removal of manure in an environmentally friendly way.
- Bringing the barn up to fire safety codes.

Volunteers groom and turn out each horse every day, says McGarrah. The horses are fed according to their individual health plans, each out of his or her own red bucket, with his or her name on it.

Some volunteers ride the horses, others simply choose to clean buckets, prepare hay or prepare meals. And everyone works to keep Red Bucket clean. “All you have to do is walk on our ranch to see how healthy our horses are,” she says. “The first thing people who come here say is, ‘This is the cleanest place I’ve ever seen.’”

Three-part model of rescue

Rescuing slaughter-bound, starving and abused horses is just Part 1 of the mission of Chino Hills, Calif.-based Red Bucket Equine Rescue.

“The second part of our mission is where the real work occurs,” says Karen McGarrah, volunteer ranch coordinator. “Our horses are carefully assessed, rehabilitated, and trained. They have been victims of unspeakable abuse, and at Red Bucket, they receive the time they need to recover and regain confidence in mankind, and in themselves.” The average weight gain for a Red Bucket rescued horse is 300 pounds, she adds.

And Part 3? “When they are ready, the horses are matched with a suitable adopter, and the horse and adopter continue to receive field support after the horse goes home. We continue to support our adopters and provide ongoing training and counsel, removing any barriers to the horse staying in their new home.

“Because of the strength of our program, and our commitment, we have a very low return rate, and are developing a strong reputation in the equine and animal welfare communities.”

Most important, each volunteer is trained in the Red Bucket Way, which stresses consistency in how people interact with the horses. “A horse who has been abused has to be treated and touched the same way every day,” she says. “Every time a volunteer walks in, the horse anticipates how it will be touched, because of the abuse factor. The animal has expectations that aren’t good, so we want to be sure they’re treated the same way every time we walk into the stall.”

Supply chain skills

And yes, McGarrah is able to call upon the skills she picked up during her healthcare supply chain career. “The art of negotiation, skills of communication, leadership, integrity

in dealing with employees and vendors are all skills I have brought with me to Red Bucket,” she says. “Being a 501(c)3 is extremely difficult in hard economic times, such as we are having today. I am using all of my skills to help the horses I love to recover from abuse through better health, better veterinary care, and healthier lives for the future.

“I have become engaged more and more with the purchasing of equipment and supplies,” she continues. “We are doing everything within our power to be prudent stewards of the funds being donated to Red Bucket.” More than 98 percent of all donations are used to take care of Red Bucket horses. The remainder is salary for Red Bucket’s lone full-time employee – the trainer.

One thing that Red Bucket lacks is a full-time veterinarian. “One of our priorities is to raise the proper funding to have an

in-house veterinarian,” she says. That said, several veterinarians volunteer their time, talent and supplies to the rescue. “We are so very thankful for this. We know we can call and discuss issues as they arise. They are available to us at moment’s notice. We are blessed with our veterinarians, who believe in what we are doing and help us help the horses.”

“Nearly every five minutes, an American horse in good condition is brutally slaughtered for human consumption,” says McGarrah. “If they’re not slaughtered, the horses are abandoned, starved, savagely abused or are left to die painful deaths.

“This is why we work so hard in using every penny of our money wisely.”

Red Bucket Equine Rescue gladly seeks donations to continue its work. Visit its website at www.redbucketrescue.org. ■

Volunteering at Red Bucket

There’s plenty of work to do at Red Bucket Equine Rescue. “Red Bucket has something for everyone, and we need many special talents and skills to help the horses,” says volunteer ranch coordinator Karen McGarrah. Examples of volunteer responsibilities:

- **Feed crew:** Feeds daily and removes blankets in the winter. The horse receives their bucket as a supplemental feeding during nighttime wellness checks. Diets are prepared based on a horse’s individual needs and are assessed and adjusted throughout their stay at Red Bucket.
- **Horse care:** A dedicated team of veterinarians, farriers, horse transport and equine specialists donate their time, skills, expertise, and trade to address the unique needs of abused and abandoned horses. In addition volunteers groom the horses daily and ensure they get exercise, and make sure their individual health care and daily enrichment needs are met.
- **Apparel:** Volunteers organize, sell, and promote Red Bucket apparel.
- **Fundraising.**
- **Stall and ranch care:** The stall care team manages the overall cleaning, maintenance, bedding, water bowls, and safety of the Red Bucket horses.
- **Newsletter:** A team of volunteers write, edit, coordinate, and publish the monthly newsletter.
- **Marketing:** This team protects and promotes the Red Bucket brand.
- **Communication:** Internal and external communication including writing, finding sources to share horse’s stories, editing, and fundraising.
- **Finance:** This team protects ensures that Red Bucket has the funds to care for the horses and the ranch.
- **Event coordination.**
- **Recycling.**
- **Visitor center and tours.**
- **Photographers:** Horses are videoed and photographed for the Red Bucket calendar, website, media events, promotional materials, “Because of You campaign,” etc.