

Real Horseman

Steve Buffery – The Toronto Sun

Sitting inside his little apartment at the Tomiko Training Centre near Campbellville, Ont., Pauly Suksiri smiled and insisted that he is a lucky man. The way Pauly figured it, he had thumbed his nose at the grim reaper many times before and survived.

Pauly said he fought in the Vietnam War with the Thai army's Black Panther Division (on the side of the Americans) and served as a paratrooper for three years.

"I was very lucky to come out of that alive," he said.

Another time, Pauly had a friend book him an airline ticket to Chicago for a visit but because he had been partying the night before and passed out, he missed the flight.

"The plane crashed and killed everyone on board," Pauly said.

Once while working at Mohawk Racetrack in Campbellville a friend invited him down to a bar on Hwy. 25, but Pauly declined because he wanted to have a clear head to watch the Kentucky Derby the next day. The friend died in a car accident on the way to the pub.

Pauly also said he was a groom for 1969 Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes winner Majestic Prince and was a thoroughbred jockey for a time in the U.S. before coming to Canada. No one can verify if any of those stories are actually true. But it doesn't really matter. Pauly said they are and that's good enough.

"I've been lucky three times," Pauly said of his brushes with death.

“But here,” he added, pointing to his stomach. “Not four times.”

A few months ago, Pauly was diagnosed with terminal cancer and was given 3-6 months to live. He didn't make it that long. Pauly died on Monday at Milton District Hospital, holding the hand of Standardbred Racetrack Chaplaincy of Canada president Jean Posthuma.

Pauly worked in the Ontario harness-racing industry for close to 40 years. There was nothing outwardly remarkable about this humble man. He never rode a pacer to major Stakes victory or trained a champion trotter. He was a groom. But he was a remarkable man nonetheless, something you could see from the number of people who helped look after him near the end, including those from the chaplaincy and his former boss John Kopas. Virtually everyone who knew him had nothing but kind things to say about Pauly, a man who did his job thoroughly for 3-4 decades and made few enemies. He's not the type of guy newspapers usually write stories about, but it's people like Pauly who have kept horse racing alive in Ontario during these difficult times for the sport. They're the unsung heroes. They don't get paid much, there are very few benefits, but they're at the track and the training centres every morning doing a tough and generally thankless job.

Pauly was one of the best at his work. He was also a survivor, one of the dozens of track workers who were thrown out of their dorms at the Mohawk backstretch in 2013 in the wake of the Ontario government's decision to cancel the Slots at Racetracks Program that provided more than 60 per cent of the horse-racing industry's revenue. As a result of dramatic decrease in revenues, Woodbine Entertainment Group opted to close the Mohawk backstretch — home to hundreds of horses as well as tack shops, a veterinary clinic, the harness-racing chaplaincy and other horse-racing related industries. The saddest part was the displacement of the track workers, many of whom had been there for decades. Pauly found a place to live and was able to keep working in the industry. He was lucky. Many others weren't as fortunate.

“A lot of them lived there for 35 years or more and didn’t know anything else and couldn’t afford any other place,” said retired racetrack publicist Bill Galvin during a recent visit to see Pauly.

“And you have to understand, grooms are on the low end of the totem pole (in terms of pay),” added Pat Harding, who along with her daughter Jennifer, was one of many race-track people who helped make Pauly as comfortable as possible as he fought his brave battle against cancer.

Pat, who works at Millar Farms in Newmarket and volunteers with the chaplaincy, remembers how heartbreaking it was watching people forced to leave their little apartments at Mohawk.

“It was just terrible,” she said. “We were going in helping some of them move. And I’d look out the window and every now and then you would see somebody walking down the road and they’d like have a Walmart bag. All their worldly possessions were in that little bag. It was so, so sad.”

“A lot of them are out of the business now because of that,” added Jennifer. “They can’t afford it anymore. Your weekly income as a groom does not really support you to live anywhere else other than the dorms in the backstretch. That’s why it’s so hard to find grooms now because you just can’t afford to do that.”

“You can’t live at Mohawk and have to pay rent to someone,” added Pat.

Pauly found a tiny apartment above a restaurant in Campbellville, though after being diagnosed with cancer, he was moved to his small place at the Tomiko Training Centre, surrounded by friends who brought him food and tea and books and other little luxuries to help him pass his days. The very gentle man seemed happy, though he admitted that he missed his apartment at Mohawk, especially his beloved garden where he grew eggplant, hot peppers, sunflowers and tomatoes.

“You never had tomatoes until you had Pauly’s tomatoes,” said Jennifer. “They were just absolutely amazing.”

Pauly smiled at the compliment, revealing with a sly smile that his secret was he used horse feed as fertilizer.

Throughout his visit with the Galvin and the Hardings, Pauly’s stomach growled. He apologized and assured his visitors that he was feeling pretty good though he wasn’t eating very much.

“Are these girls taking care of you, Pauly?” Galvin asked.

“Or are we just harassing you?” said Jennifer.

Pauly laughed.

“I’m okay,” he said barely above a whisper.

Pat said that it’s tough to get Pauly to open up.

“No matter how sick Pauly is, he always says he’s alright,” said Pat. “Real horseman, they’d never tell you how much pain they’re in. There’s something about them. I’ve seen horseman who have put their back out and were not able to walk, then two other horseman pick them up and put them on the jogger so they can jog their horses. And that’s very typical of them. And Pauly’s been in it a long time so you know how tough he is.”

Pat said that she heard of Pauly’s condition through a blacksmith and it didn’t take long for the harness-racing community to rally around him. He had no family, at least not in Canada, very little money or benefits. Friends helped pay for his medications. But the racing community came through

for Pauly much the same way as it did last year after a fire swept through Classy Lane Stables Training Centre in Puslinch, Ont., which resulted in 43 horses being killed.

Pauly seemed okay the afternoon a visitor from the Toronto Sun and a few other friends dropped in for a visit. He seemed to have accepted that it was almost his time to go.

“I’m the only one left,” he said, when asked about his family back in Thailand. “Last Monday, I dreamed about my family. And then I woke up and said, ‘These people passed away a long time (ago). Maybe my time is coming.’”

With that, Pauly laughed and all his visitors smiled. Sad smiles. Pauly was a good man whose reward at the end of his life was a line of dedicated friends who wanted to be near him and take care of him.

“Pauly’s going to be taken care of,” said Pat. “And as the time gets closer to the end, we’re going to make sure that he’s not going to be alone.” And he wasn’t.