

THE BEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD ARE CUTTERS

There is one pearl of wisdom about life that I would like to share with you in this issue that ties into one of my personal favorite stories. The words, "You need to learn how to let life touch you, not kill you" were passed on to me by my grandfather Lance Harrel back in 1962. These words turned out to be the most valuable advice that I ever received from anyone. I have since tried very hard to live my life according to them as best I could.

In 1978, after I had won the open world championship, a man writing for the Fort Worth Star Telegram asked me what I got most out of my success and achievements. I told him it definitely wasn't the buckles, the money or the recognition, which, don't get me wrong – they are always nice to have. More importantly though, it was the opportunity to meet and make friends all over the world throughout my travels.

An excellent example would be a fellow named Albert Paxton and his family. Albert, Sonny, Bill and John came into my life in 1978 as I was running for the 1978 World Championship in August down in New Orleans. Sonny, who was showing down there with me, knew I had nine days before going on to the Kentucky State Fair. So he invited myself and my family (wife, 4 kids, 2 dogs and 2 horses) to come home with him and spend those extra days at their ranch in Tallulah, Louisiana. When we arrived late that night at their beautiful ranch, he took us to a large white house. Being a bit of a history buff, I'll never forget it had a historical marker in the front yard declaring that the Union Army had camped there on their way to Vicksburg. I thought that was pretty cool! When we went inside the house, Sonny started telling me about the hot water heater, and all sorts of tidbits about the operation of the place. When I asked him why he thought I needed to know all that stuff, he replied, "because it's yours for as long as you want it. I'll be staying in town." He continued to show me around the stable, arenas, cattle pens, feed storage, etc. then off he went! His father Albert is the perfect example of a "southern gentleman" and turned out to be the greatest host anyone could ever ask for. The opportunity to rest up and decompress went a long way to making a tough year a little easier on me.

I still have the privilege of being a friend of this great family to this day, and enjoy very much being able to see John on a regular basis. You can learn an awful lot about how to treat folks from being around such wonderful people like the Paxton's. I will never forget their kindness and generosity as long as I live. It was a tremendous and unexpected blessing at that time in my life.

Over the years, I have found a lot of people like the Paxtons in this industry. Another story I have to share about people stepping up to do the "right thing" without expecting anything in return takes place in Fort Stockton, Texas also in 1978.

After driving two nights and a day, I arrived at the fairgrounds and discovered that the engine in my '76 Eldorado had seized up. So, there I was, stranded in Fort Stockton, with my whole entourage in tow, and no hope of finding a quick fix for my car anytime soon.

Jim Lee, Open World Champion of the NCHA on Gandys Time -more than once- a great trainer and showman in his own right, saw the situation and the look on my face, and said, "Looks like your having a little trouble with your caddy Leon." I told him it didn't

like I'd be going anywhere for some time. He said, well, I can't just leave you and your family and horses out here in west Texas like this, because if anyone finds out you're from California they might do something unpleasant to you! He laughed, loaded us all up and took us home with him for the next two weeks. No matter how much I insisted, he refused to accept one dime from me to compensate him for his trouble. Underneath that grumpy exterior was the kindest, most warm hearted person you could ever know.

Meanwhile, I had contacted Smiley Hill from Victorville, California. Smiley was a friend and fellow cutter who just happened to own a large Ford, Lincoln, Mercury dealership out there. I called Smiley and told him about my situation. He laughed and said, I told you not to buy that piece of junk! He told me not to worry, Lincoln made the only car capable of pulling a 2 horse inline as fast as I wanted to go. "I have a brand new '78 MarkVI Special Edition, it's silver with a black top and it'll be perfect for you." When I asked how much, he said, "it's so cheap anyone can afford it and I will have it delivered to you in Fort Stockton in two days. I'll send an extra man to get your caddy running and sell it in Midland for you. They will hook up your trailer and deliver both to you at Jim Lee's ranch in Iowa Park .

Once again I asked him, "how much is this all going to cost me Smiley???" (I was just sure I was going to get my britches rolled up) He said, "buy the boys a plane ticket back to L.A. I'll catch up with you in 60 days with the paperwork on the car at the Derby in Waco. If you don't like the car or the price, I'll turn it into a demo at the dealership." Wow! Needless to say, the car was great!

So, there you have it. Two remarkable acts of kindness in just ONE weekend. I have believed in miracles, and people ever since. If you'll just offer a friendly smile and some kind words wherever you go you will give them a chance to show you how much they care and have to offer you. Horses and the game of cutting have afforded me the opportunity to get to meet and know these types of folks, and for that, I will be forever grateful. It's so easy to be suspicious in today's world, and by keeping your distance you will miss out on these precious opportunities, so take advantage of the friends around you that you may not even know yet. They can change your life, and maybe even save it one day.