

Sponsors help make Chief Joseph Days possible

By KATY NESBITT
For the Wallowa County
Chieftain

JOSEPH — This July marks the 75th Chief Joseph Days Rodeo — four days and nights of pro rodeo action supported by generations of dedicated volunteers and local sponsors.

The one constant at every Chief Joseph Days event — the rodeo court coronation, the Christmas party or the sponsor dinner, the directors take time to thank every single sponsor who contributed to either the court's regalia, buckles for the rodeo contestants or food for the hospitality room. If they were to thank the volunteers it would take at least an hour to name the 300 or more people who help make Wallowa County's biggest event a success year after year.

Terry Jones is the Chief Joseph Days Rodeo president and is typically the director who personally thanks each of the sponsors.

"There wouldn't be a Chief Joseph Days without sponsors," Jones said. "We depend on them a lot."

What they fund

Sponsorships, Jones said, pay for contract acts like the barrelman, bullfighters, the announcer and the scoreboard. He said the rodeo has relied on a lot of the same sponsors for many years.

"It's incredible how loyal some of our sponsors are," Jones said. "They are helping Chief Joseph Days get better and better every year."

Debbie Surface and Brad Peterson of Joseph are some of the loyal sponsors to whom Jones referred. For many years Gresham nursery owners Debbie and her husband Richard entertained friends during the rodeo at their ranch outside of Joseph.

"We had 38 rodeo tickets for friends and would have a big shindig at the cabin," Surface said.

Richard Surface died in 2009, but Debbie Surface said she continued to entertain friends at the ranch during Chief Joseph Days. When the rodeo box became available in 2011 she said the rodeo office called and asked if she would like to rent it.

After 10 years entertaining guests in their box, Surface said, "Now we've gotten to know everyone and often take the announcer and specialty acts out on our boat."

It was the same year she started renting the rodeo box, Surface said, that she and Peterson, a longtime friend, started dating. They own a house on Wallowa Lake and have become enmeshed in the local rodeo family.

The couple sponsors the buckle for the mini bull riding champion, buys items at the various rodeo dinner auctions, twice were the high bidder on chaps auctioned at the Thursday



Brad Peterson and Debbie Surface are just two of the longtime sponsors who have helped support Chief Joseph Days Rodeo over the years.

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Terry Jones, Chief Joseph Days Rodeo president

Tough Enough to Wear Pink performance, and last year they donated a new heating system for the Thunder Room, the rodeo grounds event center. With the hope of future development of the rodeo grounds, the couple donated a 100-by-100-foot metal building.

"We believe in belonging to the community and are hoping what we do helps strengthen it," Surface said.

Where they come from

Roughly half of the sponsors are from Wallowa County, like The Dollar Stretcher in Enterprise, a local grocery store that supplies food served in the hospitality room. For many years the store's owner, Mike Goss, could be seen visiting with Tim Marshall, a longtime rodeo volunteer, as he barbecued the meat served for dinner before each night's performance.

"Chief Joseph Days is a cultural and historical event that brings Nez Perce tribal members, rodeo cowboys and fans to the county," Goss said. "It's a pretty big deal and it's for everybody."

Goss said he believes it is important to support the rodeo because of the benefit to the community, including small businesses like his, but credited the contribution made by the volunteers.

"It's easy to write a check, but it blows me away the amount of time, blood, sweat and tears the volunteers put into the rodeo," he said.

Some of the biggest supporters and volunteers at the rodeo were groomed that way. Jones, who was the father of a rodeo court member, said that the

contribution of the girls often extends into their adulthood.

Teah Jones was on the 1991 rodeo court and has been a volunteer ever since. For almost 20 years, she rode with the Tuckerettes drill team and ended up organizing the group until 2018. This winter, she was elected to serve as a rodeo director and oversees the Tuckerettes and the rodeo court. For the past 10 years, she has served as the court's stylist, choosing the outfits the girls wear in parades, during run-ins at the rodeos and when they travel.

"I think once you become involved in the organization, it's like a family," Jones said. "To be part of your own hometown rodeo brings everybody together — you feel like you are a part of something."

She said the directors, who do everything from pick rocks out of the arena to opening the gates for the brones and bulls, make their work fun. Ever since that first experience with Chief Joseph Days Rodeo court and later as Miss Rodeo Oregon, Jones said most people get involved because they love the sport and in the case of the court members, their families get involved, too.

"Getting the past court members and their families as volunteers for life is hugely important," Jones said.

Jill Huffman was on the court in 1989 and helps put on the annual sponsor dinner the night before the rodeo begins.

"Chief Joseph Days means a lot to the rodeo court members — it's not about wearing a crown or traveling around to rodeos, it's that tradition you learn

about and become a part of," Huffman said.

Over the years Huffman said she has served as the court chaperone and court director, helps with court coronation in the spring and has done everything else imaginable from pouring beer, cooking at the Cowboy Breakfast, and even picking up garbage under the bleachers. She agreed with Teah Jones that it becomes a family affair.

"When my sister, Shelly Stilson Paparazzo, was on the court we pulled the horse trailer for the girls," Huffman said.

Each year her sons Cody and Chance Arbogast help with the sponsor dinner and both plan on volunteering into the future.

Huffman said, "Once you've been a part of Chief Joseph Days, it becomes a part of you."



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