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Guymon Pioneer Days Rodeo

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Couple to show off beloved Shire hitch at Guymon rodeo

GUYMON, Okla. – The Diamond Z English Shire Hitch isn't a business venture for Renn and Ree Zaphiropoulos.

It's a way for the couple to share its passion for the horse breed with the world.

"The hitch is a hobby and a love ... a deep appreciation," Ree Zaphiropoulos said. "The Shires have so enriched our lives in the places we go, whether it's to buy them, places we show them, all over, really. People see them and invite us to come show them. We've been all over the Western United States.

"We love sharing them with people, and they absolutely fall in love. The horses love the attention, too."

And that's the reason the Zaphiropouloses are heading to Guymon the end of April and first of May for the Guymon Pioneer Days Rodeo. Quality Integrated Services is funding the Diamond Z Ranch's trip to the Oklahoma Panhandle as part of its sponsorship for the annual rodeo, which will have performances at 7:30 p.m. Friday, April 30; 2 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, May 1; and 2 p.m. Sunday, May 2.

"I know they have been at several rodeos, and they put on a really good show," said Lonnie Childress, Quality Integrated Services' chief executive officer. "They've got a beautiful hitch, and the horses are dark with white feathering on the legs. These things are all well trained and trained to do it all. There isn't a lead horse; they can move the horses around."

Childress has known the Zaphiropouloses for several years. Renn is originally from Greece and came to the United States to study. In 1969, he co-founded Versatec, the world's leading producer of electrostatic printers and plotters. He is a retired corporate vice president of Xerox Corp., which merged with Versatec in 1975. Renn holds 29 patents and is a pioneer in the development of the electrostatic writing technique for the production of hard copy.

Upon his retirement in 1986, his wife said, the couple made their way to England, which is where they fell in love with the animals for the first time.

"We went to say goodbye to his sales staff and all the people we knew in Europe, and while we were there, we went to the Bass (beer) museum. They deliver to the pubs with Shire horses, big draft horses."

These horses can handle that kind of load. They stand 18 to 19 hands tall and weigh about 2,000 pounds. Shires can be black, gray or bay and are a cousin to the Clydesdale – while the Clydesdale is from Scotland, the Shire is from England. The Shire was the war horse of England, ridden by the knights during the middle ages.

"The Shires are just magnificent horses," Ree Zaphiropoulos said.

Childress agrees, which is why he's doing everything he can to get the horses to No Man's Land. He's seen what the Zaphiropouloses do, with the help of their trainer and hitch driver, Chris Hone.

"I think this is amazing," Childress said. "They don't charge anything to show their hitch, which is different than most things you'd bring to this kind of show. We're bringing them here, paying for trip to Guymon, because it's not cheap to haul that many horses and the hitch."

So why are Childress and Quality Integrated Services involved?

“I’ve enjoyed the rodeo and Pioneer Day since I was a kid,” he said. “I watched Freckles Brown there. I have always admired the rodeo. I have always been a supporter of it, and the people in Guymon have always supported it. It was always a great thrill to be part of the rodeo.

“Pioneer Day was always a big deal to us. I moved to Guymon when I was in the sixth grade, and we have always enjoyed it. I live right up there next to it on top of the hill, and I enjoy being able to see it. My wife, Nancy, and I have a spot in our hearts for Pioneer Day and the festivities that go along with it.”

Childress knows the work it takes to not only keep the hitch in excellent shape, but also the work it takes to train the Shires to handle the load they take on when they perform. Those tasks fall on Hone, who has worked with the Zaphiropouloses for two decades.

“Chris is a wonderful guy,” Ree Zaphiropoulos said. “He always worked with racehorses, and his family has a ranch. He’s a real cowboy.

“He has really connected with the Shires. He loves them and understands them, and they understand him. He worked part time for us for nine years, then he’s been full time for 12.”

And just like they see the Shires as an extension of their family, the Zaphiropouloses hold tight their relationship with Hone and his family.

“What we really are is a family operation,” she said. “You could think we adopted him and his family.”

And they’re all anxious to show their passion for the “magnificent” Shires to the folks heading to Guymon for the Pioneer Days festivities.

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