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How One Founder Started a Nonprofit — and Raised \$1 Million

By Timothy Sandoval

Kim Tschirret's father was a high-functioning alcoholic.

During her childhood, everything looked fine from the outside. Tschirret's father was successful in the steel business, then the oil business. The family belonged to country clubs, and, as a teen, Tschirret raised horses and showed them in competitions; her father encouraged her and attended the events.

But there was a side to her father that no one knew outside the family. He had an explosive temper, and alcohol made it worse. Tschirret's father wasn't physically abusive, but he regularly hurled invectives at his wife, at Kim, and at her older brother and sister.

"He would call me four-letter words and tell me how worthless I was," Tschirret says, "just things that you don't say to your kid."

Tschirret, now 50, didn't discuss what happened inside the house with anyone, not even her siblings.



PHOTO BY REBECCA MILL

Kim Tschirret loved horses as a child, so when she suffered emotional abuse, she found comfort talking to them. These days, her nonprofit is helping children who have experienced trauma.

Instead, she talked to her horses — they lived in stables close to her home in Aurora, Ohio, just outside Cleveland, then in Oklahoma City. "I could talk to them, and I knew that they wouldn't tell anybody else," she explains.

Tschirret grew up, went to college, and married, eventually settling in Raleigh, N.C., with her husband.

Like her father, she was successful in business. Tschirret worked in marketing, including for tech firms during the dot.com boom in the late '90s and early 2000s. She managed multimillion-dollar budgets and oversaw production of national television advertisements.

Finding the Inspiration

Her son was born in 2001, and she left the work force to care for him a year later. Around that time, she also became a Christian. "I'd been searching my whole life, and I knew I was missing something," she says. When her mother died a few years later in 2004, she started attending therapy sessions. Childhood memories came rushing back.

Eventually, her interest in horses rekindled, and that led her to a book called *Hope Rising*. Written by Kim Meeder, the book describes a ranch in Oregon that Meeder founded for troubled children to care for abandoned or abused horses. At the ranch, the kids and the horses help each other heal, according to the book. The stories reminded Tschirret of her childhood — and lit a fire.

She decided to start a nonprofit to help heal kids who experience trauma by giving them a chance to care for, and bond with, horses. God was calling her to do it, she says: "I just knew that was it."

Still, it seemed far-fetched to some. In early 2009 — when Tschirret first started talking to friends and family about the idea — the country was in recession. How was she going to get donors? Find land? Tschirret knew such concerns were serious — but she moved forward anyway.

Bringing a Nonprofit to Life

Lots of people say they'd love to start a nonprofit. Few do.

Most people think about the mission: housing the homeless, caring for the sick, mentoring children. Few focus on the rest: drawing up business plans, dealing with creditors, assembling a board of directors — and, of course, fundraising. But Tschirret is a business person; the boring (but important) stuff didn't scare her.

In 2009 Tschirret founded Hope Reins, a Christian nonprofit that enables youths who've experienced trauma to spend 90-minute sessions caring for a rescued horse, a tactic often referred to as "equine therapy."

Last year, the group's annual revenue reached \$1 million, in part because of a \$300,000 gift from a big donor. And this year it hopes to bring in \$1.3 million. The group is about halfway there and has a strong base of support to meet the goal, Tschirret says. It has taken hard work, drive, creativity — and some luck — to surpass the \$1 million mark on its annual operating budget, Tschirret says. Here's how her charity went from idea to reality to stability in less than 10 years.

Don't overlook the basics: Verify the need for your mission and sharpen skills.

When she starting out in 2009, Tschirret knew she had to do her homework. After some research, she found that no organization in the area was quite like the one she had in mind.

She also enrolled in a training program at Mission Increase, an organization that helps Christian ministries develop their fundraising capabilities. There, she learned the fundamentals, including how "not to treat your donors as ATMs," she says.

Make connections: Sometimes it comes down to being in the right place at the right time.

In those early days, Tschirret got lucky too. After seeing a 70-acre plot of land in downtown Raleigh at an Easter egg hunt with her son, she met with an official at a local Baptist church that owned the plot.

On the spot, he offered to lease her 20 acres at the rate of \$1 a month. It was quite a gift. But she knew there was more to do before she could accept the offer.



PHOTO BY REBECCA MILL

Hope Reins lets children like 5-year-old Destiny care for and bond with horses.

Form an advisory board.

Tschirret would need to recruit trustees, so she drew up a list of people with the types of skills she would need, including those in law, finance, business, and nonprofits. And, of course, she included people who understood how to care for horses.

Tschirret asked friends, family, acquaintances — pretty much anyone she knew — to recommend individuals to serve. When she reached out to candidates, she asked them for more recommendations and then tracked those people down too.

Before she invited trustees to sign on, she wanted to vet the idea. After six weeks of networking, Tschirret formed a seven-person advisory board to assess the viability of her idea.

The board met twice and mulled over big questions: Would there be enough community support? How would the organization acquire horses? How many employees did it need?

"We sat in a room and went through the pros and the cons," Tschirret says. "We talked about: 'What's it really going to take?'"

In the end, Tschirret and the advisers concluded that Hope Reins could work — and that it would take the land on offer from the church. One consideration was especially important: The board concluded that the charity could differentiate itself from nearby nonprofits by offering unique services. "We had the location, we had the opportunity — and [the advisory board] really had a heart for what we were doing," Tschirret says.

Seek advice from other leaders.

Tschirret also traveled to Bend, Ore., to meet Meeder, who runs Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch, the nonprofit featured in the book *Hope Rising*. Meeder offered encouragement but also pressed Tschirret on her motivations for starting a nonprofit. Meeder made it clear that doing so wouldn't be easy. It was a gut check, Tschirret says, "a good reminder ... that there's going to be hard times."

Hit the ground running.

The organization obtained nonprofit status in October 2009, and the work began in earnest. The advisory board disbanded, but three of its members became trustees on the newly formed Board of Directors. Tschirret quickly sent a letter to nearly everyone she knew — family, friends — asking them to contribute to the fledgling nonprofit. Volunteers helped Tschirret clean up the donated property and obtain three horses from rescue groups. All of this quick action enabled Hope Reins to begin serving children in mid-2010 — on a razor-thin budget.

Hold a kickoff fundraising event that makes you proud.

Tschirret and the board knew the organization needed to build a broader base of donors. Toward this end, Mission Increase offered Tschirret a \$25,000 grant to hold a kickoff banquet in late 2010.

Hope Reins went all out. Speakers, including Tschirret and a mother whose child was being served by Hope Reins, drew up speeches. Meeder flew in from Oregon to speak. Meredith Andrews, a Christian singer, performed a version of her song "You're Not Alone" while a video of children working with horses played on a screen in the background.

Allin Foulkrod, the Hope Reins board chair who acted as an "executive producer" for the banquet, said the gathering had to demonstrate to attendees that Hope Reins cared enough to invest lots of time and energy. Foulkrod runs an event-planning company based in Raleigh and says, "Most nonprofits do a really bad first event. They decide that there's no money to produce something, so as a result, they cut all the corners."

The event brought in \$120,000 in donations — much more than expected — and gave Hope Reins a lot of supporters to follow up with. "We were blown away," Tschirret says.

Deepen the pool of donors.

Tschirret held many one-on-one meetings with those who attended the banquet, asking them to commit to long-term support.

She and other board members also asked donors to invite people they knew to the stables to see the group's work in action. "If we can get people out to our property ... they're very likely to support us," Tschirret says.

Hope Reins held additional banquets during the first few years and promoted them far and wide to draw in new donors. Organizers also asked supporters to invite friends and family.

By the end of 2014, the group's revenue reached \$340,000.

Set ambitious goals: \$400,000 in five months.

Late that same year, Hope Reins embarked on its greatest challenge to date: acquiring a new property in Raleigh, a 33-acre farm about five miles north that would allow it to serve more children. Things were in motion: The family selling the farm accepted the group's \$1 million offer for the property and gave it six months to secure funding. Officials running a federal conservation program agreed to give the nonprofit a low-interest loan for the purchase.

However, the trustees wanted to ensure the organization could pay for desired upgrades to the property and the increased expenses that came with a bigger facility, so with Tschirret's input, the board members set a goal to raise \$400,000 in five months — from January 2015 to the end of May. The thinking was: "If our supporters aren't going to support us, then we're not going to take this loan," Tschirret says. "It just wouldn't be wise."

So the nonprofit rented the farm and held open houses on the premises, hosting about 20 in five months. They invited donors, volunteers, and families that were being served and asked them to invite others they knew.

During the events, Tschirret and others gave short tours, displayed renderings of structures they hoped to build, and shared potential numbers: conveying that they could serve 1,000 children by 2018 at the new location. Tschirret wanted people to understand "why having this place was going to help us serve more kids and provide more hope and healing."

Tschirret followed up with those who visited the new farm — through phone calls, meetings over coffee, lunches, and dinners. The group sent mail and email appeals too, reminding supporters about the organization's goal and providing updates when they reached certain milestones — like passing

the \$200,000 mark, Tschirret says.

By the end of the campaign, the group exceeded its goal and raised \$407,427 — plus an additional \$735,635 that was pledged over the three subsequent years.

Some Setbacks Along the Way

Hope Reins moved to its new location in late 2015. As expected, expenses grew, and fundraising had to keep pace.

Tschirret admits that times have occasionally been tough. In 2016, for instance, there were periods when the organization didn't bring in many gifts and making payroll was difficult, she says.

But there were lots of bright spots too. In 2017, a \$300,000 gift from a prominent local donor enabled the group to build a covered arena so kids could ride and care for the horses even in bad weather.

The big gift from the high-profile donor was a "real stamp of approval for us," Tschirret says.

These days, the organization is on firmer ground, according to Tschirret. Early this year, it launched its first giving society, Legacy of Hope, for donors who make five-year commitments of varying sizes.

So far, about 40 donors have joined the society, and Tschirret hopes more than half of all revenue ultimately will come from the program.

"Everyone I'm meeting with, I'm asking to join," Tschirret says. If successful, the program will relieve some fundraising burden in coming years because a portion of the annual budget would be locked in.

To meet its revenue goal for this year, Hope Reins must raise \$540,000 by December 31 — the largest sum it has ever raised in such a short period. Still, she expects some big donors to step up this year.

"I'm nervously confident," Tschirret says.