

WHAT BARBARO LEFT BEHIND:
THE CELEBRITY ILLNESS NARRATIVE AS INSPIRATION

By Kathryn Levy Feldman

Over the last thirty years, the celebrity illness narrative has developed into a unique subset of the literary genre. These narratives differ from conventional illness narratives only by virtue of the fact that they are told by individuals who live their lives in the public eye.¹ As such, celebrity illness narratives wield enormous cultural influence and represent unique and powerful opportunities for their authors to educate the general public about their disease, increase awareness and funding for the affliction, and inspire other patients with the same condition. In fact, as Ylisabeth S. Bradshaw notes in her review of Barron Lerner's book *When Illness Goes Public: Celebrity Patients and How We Look at Medicine*, "Public discourse on medical issues is often mediated through a celebrity's illness, for instance disability and spinal cord injury through Christopher Reeve's life or Parkinson disease and stem cell research through Michael J. Fox's."²

While most celebrity illness narratives are told by people, I will argue that the illness narrative of Barbaro, the horse who won the 2006 Kentucky Derby, subsequently shattered his leg in the Preakness, spent eight months recuperating from life-saving surgery and was ultimately euthanized due to complications from laminitis, a crippling equine disease, is a unique example of a celebrity illness narrative, even though it is about an animal.

Obviously, Barbaro cannot tell his own story, so his medical team, his owners, and ultimately, the press tell it for him. And while the presence of multiple interpreters and interpretations is itself problematic, it is not my intention to delve into the issues these myriad points of view create. Instead, I will focus on the aspects of Barbaro's narrative that make it similar to celebrity illness narratives written by people, namely the story's capacity to: educate the public about veterinary medicine as well as the Kentucky

Derby winner's condition in particular; inspire others who are suffering from life-threatening or chronic medical conditions of their own; and increase awareness for equine welfare issues, encouraging political advocacy on state and national levels.

I should point out that I am in a unique position to write about Barbaro since I have been following the story as a journalist since May 2006. I first wrote about Barbaro for the University of Pennsylvania alumni magazine, *The Pennsylvania Gazette* and subsequently signed a contract with the owners to write the authorized book about their horse's life.³ I have been granted access to many of the players who told Barbaro's story, those who lived through it with him and those who were inspired by it. Many of the first hand accounts of these people are based on my interviews with them and have not been previously reported.

Since, for obvious reasons, there is no actual, definitive illness narrative written by Barbaro, nor is there ever likely to be, I have relied on my own two articles on Barbaro as the factual core of the story (Appendix A & Appendix B), augmented by other printed (as opposed to video) accounts of his illness that appeared in the mainstream press. There are many times that the press documents the thoughts and feelings of the main protagonists in the story as well as their actual words. I have construed these accounts to be accurate. In addition, I rely on my own interviews with the subjects in this paper, which I know to be accurate. I do not think that the lack of actual document from the ill celebrity is as problematic as it may seem because it is not my intention to suggest that Barbaro's story was a celebrity illness narrative by virtue of how it was written but rather for what it said and inspired in those that read it.

As Neil Vickers, a lecturer at King's College London, remarks in the September 2007 issue of *Prospect* magazine, "It's a striking fact that before the late 1950s there were very few 'illness narratives,' and those that did come to public notice were

produced entirely in the US.”⁴ Indeed Vickers credits the celebrity illness narrative (which he traces to the late 1980s) with transforming the genre from “a first cousin of the self-help book” to a narrative form in its own right that chronicles more than the “nuts and bolts of being ill.”⁵ Early pioneers of the form, such as Betty Rollin (*First You Cry*, 1975), Betty Ford (*The Times of My Life*, 1979), Susan Sontag (*Illness as Metaphor*, 1987) and Gilda Radner, (*Always Something Going On*, 1989) opened the door for high profile individuals to share their candid and personal struggles with their diseases or chronic conditions, explicating, often in heart-wrenching detail, how these illnesses affected their lives. In the decades since Rollin, Ford, Sontag and Radner, we have read about William Styron’s mental illness (*Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*, 1992) Mary Tyler Moore’s battles with alcoholism and diabetes (*After All*, 1996), Michael J. Fox’s life with Parkinson’s disease (*Lucky Man*, 2003), Lance Armstrong’s remarkable victory over testicular cancer (*It’s Not About the Bike*, 2003), and Fran Drescher’s ovarian cancer (*Cancer Schmancer*, 2003), to name a few.

While celebrity illness narratives serve many of the same functions as conventional illness narratives, namely to “recount an individual’s experience with accident and disease, usually tracing the situation from onset through diagnosis, treatment, and recovery,”⁶ the influence of these stories cannot be underestimated. “To read about these celebrities is to consider the emergence of a group of factors that nowadays are so commonplace that they have come to be expected, such as public knowledge and perhaps the deliberate publicization of the details of an eminent person’s diagnosis and even symptoms; the personal involvement of the celebrity in the movement to call attention to the disease and to find ways to treat it; the rallying to the cause by others affected by the disease, and the formation of advocacy groups of which the celebrity is the focus.”⁷ It is perhaps ironic that the non-celebrity patient rails against being categorized as his disease while the celebrity patient uses this association to become the “spokesperson” for the disease.

Since they are written for the general population, as opposed to the medical or scholarly communities, celebrity illness narratives provide their authors with unique opportunities to influence and inform the public about treatment options. According to Frances Bonner and Susan McKay (1995) who documented the Australia media's reporting of singer Kylie Monogue's breast cancer, there was a "twenty-fold increase in the number of television news stories on breast cancer in the seven days following the announcement of Kylie's diagnosis."⁸ Similarly, after Nancy Reagan elected to undergo a radical mastectomy in October 1987 for a "suspicious lesion," there was a 25% reduction in the use of breast-conserving surgery as opposed to mastectomy among women with local or regional breast cancer diagnosed within six months of her operation.⁹ What is especially interesting about this example is that Reagan's decision was controversial. Numerous articles appeared in the mainstream press calling the treatment "extreme," that were countered by those that defended a woman's prerogative to choose whatever type of therapy seemed best for her. Clearly, as Nattinger et al, report (1998), "medical care can be influenced substantially by the behavior of celebrity role models."¹⁰

Both Couser and Frank find the motives for writing celebrity and non-celebrity illness narratives to be similar: "the urge for self-reflection and a desire to serve those with the same condition."¹¹ There is no doubt that some of this serving comes in the form of setting an example of how to live with or "beat" the disease. Often, one need look no farther than the covers of celebrity illness narratives to learn of their inspirational tones. "A super shot of inspiration...Reeve's candor and unselfishness are apparent in every page," touts *The Oklahoman* on the cover of Christopher Reeve's book, *Nothing is Impossible: Reflections on a New Life*.¹² "Lots of drama...an inspirational story," raves *People* magazine on the cover of Lance Armstrong's book.¹³ Senator Arlen Specter writes about the inspiration his story provided to his wife's high school classmate's husband, who had recently been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, like he.¹⁴ "[The classmate] reported that her husband, who had been listless, fatigued, and staying

in bed, read my report and said, 'If Arlen can do it, so can I,' For the first time he left the house to walk the dog.”¹⁵

Celebrities frequently find themselves in the roles of “spokespeople” for their particular diseases. Both Michael J. Fox and the late Christopher Reeve became public advocates for their conditions, inspiring others to rally around their respective causes. As Christina S. Beck documents (2005), Fox’s position as both Parkinson’s patient and celebrity “ultimately bolstered the courage and resolve of other Parkinson’s patients, many of whom believe that a cure looms near if funding could be found.”¹⁶ An anonymous letter writer to *People Weekly*, noted Fox’s role in spurring him to action: “I have just started a new job and cannot let it be known that I have Parkinson’s...Michael, if you are willing to lobby for us, I will come out of the closet and be an activist as well.”¹⁷ In a December 1, 1998 article in *USA Today*, Abraham Lieberman, medical director of the National Parkinson Foundation, applauded Fox’s advocacy and noted the impact of another celebrity patient: “The greatest thing for polio was when Franklin D. Roosevelt had polio and chaired the March of Dimes. He was the driving force.”¹⁸

Similarly, “personal stories of breast cancer have raised social awareness, destigmatized the disease, and have been key in creating significant changes in health policies.”¹⁹ In particular, many trace the breast cancer public advocacy movement to the work of poet Audre Lorde who wrote in *The Cancer Journals* (1981), “What would happen if an army of one-breasted women descended upon congress?”²⁰ And even before Lorde presaged the existence of the National Breast Cancer Coalition, journalist Rose Kushner, documented her illness in an investigative report (1975), challenging the then standard procedure, for surgeons to perform a one-step biopsy and mastectomy.²¹ “Her efforts resulted in a change of standard clinical procedure to the two-step biopsy and treatment decision—an amazing feat for a lone citizen-activist.”²²

As the evidence suggests, “celebrity voices are much more likely to be heard and heeded, especially in the political arena.”²³ Indeed, as Ebner and Derrick note (1999),

“when members of the Parkinson’s Action Network (PAN) had spoken before the House Appropriations committee, almost half the seats were empty. But when Fox appeared, the House was full.”²⁴ So while no one wishes illness on anyone, it seems that in our celebrity-obsessed culture, when disease strikes individuals in the public eye, it brings with it opportunities for them to speak for those who may be similarly afflicted but not listened to.

Which brings me to the problematic issue of the role of the celebrities’ actual voice in the telling of his/her illness narrative. In many cases, celebrities employ ghostwriters to craft their illness narratives, often acknowledging their presence. Lance Armstrong’s book is written by he and Sally Jenkins. Betty Ford’s is written by she and Chris Chase. It could be argued that while the story belongs to the celebrity, the words are shaped, edited and organized by the writer. I do not mean to insinuate that ghostwriters alter the celebrity’s story, but they do report it. In this sense, I do not feel that it is much of a stretch to argue that Barbaro’s story is indeed a celebrity illness narrative even though he was unable to tell it himself. Certainly the story was reported for him by the thousands of reporters who covered his life both before and after his accident. Certainly Barbaro lived his life in the public eye.

There was a buzz about Barbaro long before he won the 2006 Kentucky Derby. Undefeated on both turf and dirt, he looked like a legitimate contender for the Triple Crown, thoroughbred racing’s challenge of three increasingly difficult races. “Barbaro is the real deal,” proclaimed the *Boston Globe* after his win in the Florida Derby.²⁵ “Lael Stable’s brilliant prospect” is how *Bloodhorse* magazine described him even before he won the Tropical Derby on New Year’s Day, one of the traditional prep races for the Kentucky Derby.²⁶ Even his jockey, Edgar Prado recognized his greatness. “I could have been anywhere in the race and still would have won,” he said after the Tropical Park Derby. “That’s how good he is.”²⁷

When Barbaro won the famed Kentucky Derby by six and a half lengths—the fifth largest margin of victory ever—the pundits placed him in a class of his own. “In the wake of Barbaro’s six and a half length runaway in Saturday’s Derby, superlatives are fully justified,” wrote highly regarded racing columnist Andrew Beyer in the *Washington Post*. “Maybe it is premature to use the *s* word [superhorse] for the undefeated colt, but barring some unlucky development, he is going to win the Triple Crown.”²⁸

Indeed, America jumped onto the Barbaro bandwagon with the fervor usually reserved for rock stars. Owners Gretchen and Roy Jackson noted that their homebred’s victory in the Kentucky Derby “captured the hearts of many racing fans as well as newcomers to the sport...Our beloved Barbaro was now America’s horse.”²⁹ Wherever he went, the press followed, especially when Barbaro returned to Fair Hill Training Center in Maryland to rest and train before the next race in the Triple Crown series. “Media surrounded Fair Hill in all directions, even overhead as television crews in helicopters shot footage of the scene from the sky. All morning, reporters and the curious stopped by Matz’ [the trainer’s] barn to see Barbaro. One tourist marched down the middle of the barn aisle during training hours and plotted down his camera bag, [explaining to Matz that he was here to see BarBarrow]”.³⁰

It wasn’t surprising then that a national television audience of approximately four million people tuned in on May 20, 2006 to see if Barbaro could capture the second jewel in the Triple Crown, the Preakness. Instead, they watched the dream disintegrate in real time when the beloved horse shattered his right hind leg about one hundred yards into the race. When the track announcer cried that Barbaro had been pulled up, the television cameras found him waving his badly broken right hind leg in the air at an unnatural angle, as his jockey jumped off to steady him. It was a heart-breaking scene. The ambulance pulled onto the track and a black tarp was erected around the horse, and then hastily dismantled when the assistant trainer told them it would spook the horse further.

People in the stands started to scream. All the while, the camera focused on Barbaro waving his right hind leg in the air, then putting it down gently, testing it, to see if this time, it might work.

Ultimately the horse was loaded onto the ambulance, taken back to the barn and the decision made to try and save his life even though the bones in his leg were fractured like shards of glass. A police escort was hastily assembled and almost one hour after his racing career ended, Barbaro left Pimlico racecourse, in a specially equipped equine ambulance, for the University of Pennsylvania's large animal hospital, New Bolton Center, in Kennett Square Pennsylvania. Traffic pulled over and stopped as the ambulance made its way to the interstate where Maryland state troopers took over. With news helicopters flying overhead and the on and off ramps to I-95 closed, the procession sped toward the Pennsylvania border in a scene reminiscent of the O. J. Simpson car chase. Fans hung banners and sheets over the overpasses that read, "Good Luck Barbaro. We love you." It was, according to one of the track vets who rode in the ambulance, "surreal."

For the next eight months, the story of Barbaro's recovery from the surgery that repaired his leg, rarely strayed far from the headlines, becoming the third most popular sports-related Google search term for 2006 and providing constant fodder for updates on such media venues as ABC's Good Morning America, the CBS Morning Show, NBC Sports, Larry King Live and ESPN.³¹ For days after the initial surgery, "scores of reporters camped in their cars or van on the Hospital grounds, waiting for news, emailing stories back to big-city or hometown newspapers, or broadcasting updates to television or radio stations."³² The University of Pennsylvania set up a message board to accommodate the thousands of people who sent the horse get-well messages, more than 60,000 by January 29, 2007, and the vet school posted daily and then weekly updates on Barbaro's condition on their web site throughout his convalescence. During Barbaro's time at New

Bolton Center, visitors to the general website with reports on his condition, averaged between 5,000 and 6,000 per day. On some days, the number of hits reached 177,000.³³

During this time another website, www.timwoolleyracing.com, established by Alex Brown, an exercise rider at Fair Hill Training Center as well as a professor in internet marketing at the University of Delaware became the “official” website for all things Barbaro. When Brown launched this site two years earlier to give his buddy Tim Woolley, for whom he was exercising horses, some publicity, he averaged about six hits a day. On May 21, when Brown posted the information that Barbaro was out of surgery before the general press had the news, the site received 3,000 hits and crashed. As of October, 2007, the site had logged over two million visitors and six million page views and remains an active forum to this day for work being done in Barbaro’s name averaging, according to Brown, about one thousand hits per day.

When Barbaro was ultimately euthanized due to complications from laminitis, a crippling hoof disease, on January 29, 2007, his death garnered generated front-page news coverage in newspapers across the United States including *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *Daily Racing Form*. On January 30, 2007, a Google search of Barbaro returned 2, 392 articles on his death. One of those on the web site PopMatters noted, “On 29 January 2007, after eight months of loyal fans keeping vigil as he fought the good fight, the world lost a beloved celebrity. His passing was not just a footnote in the annals of a busy news day; it was a lead story, beating out the war in Iraq, a leak in the CIA, the economy, and Hillary Clinton’s presidential aspirations. In a televised news conference, the physician who was with him at his death could barely contain his grief. The hospital where he spent his last days has been flooded with sympathy card and emails and flowers. Eyewitnesses report that when people across the country heard the news on radio or TV or by word of moth, they openly wept in public. It is all the more remarkable that the object of such media importance and public devotion was a horse named Barbaro.”³⁴

There is little doubt that Barbaro was indeed a celebrity, albeit, one who never sought that distinction. His illness narrative, told almost continually for eight months by local, national and international media representatives, focused attention “on such things as veterinary care, catastrophic injuries, surgical techniques, laminitis, how fragile the thoroughbred is, and institutions such as the one where he was treated, the University of Pennsylvania’s New Bolton Center George D. Widener large Animal Hospital.”³⁵ In addition, Barbaro’s story inspired many who were involved in illness narratives of their own. After Barbaro’s death, his legacy inspired his fans to remain committed to the causes he came to represent: laminitis research, safer racing surfaces and opposition to horse slaughter.

While New Bolton Center has had its share of celebrity patients within the “horse” world, Barbaro was the one who had the largest national following as well as the largest press entourage. The public nature of the injury combined with the “celebrity” status of the patient thrust both equine veterinary medicine and Barbaro’s surgeon, Dean Richardson, into the international spotlight, a position Richardson did not relish. Speaking at the 53rd annual convention of the American Association of Equine practitioners in Orlando this past winter, Richardson recalled that the surgery was the most routine part of the experience. “That’s the part I do a lot. It’s the part I’m best at,” he said. “What you’re not prepared for is...the press coverage.”³⁶ Richardson’s objective in these frequent press conferences was to explain, in clear and simple terms how different equine and human medicine are—a point he is not sure came across. “I’m not sure you can prepare yourself to speak to that many reporters. I prepared myself to tell the truth and be very aware that you may have to repeat yourself and speak very simple and keep on point. Those were my only real goals,” he told the conference of his peers. “Having your post-operative radiographs show up all over the world, and having people calling from Honk Kong, Italy, and wherever else, is a little bit daunting.”³⁷

Regardless of his self-critique, Richardson's words on camera and in print brought visibility to the University of Pennsylvania as well as the profession of veterinary medicine. "By shining a light on the profession, we've allowed the general public to learn, firsthand, what it is that vets can do, not only in orthopedics but across the range of condition we treat," said Dr. Corinne Sweeney, associate dean for New Bolton Center and chief operating officer and executive hospital director.³⁸ In addition to visibility, the University received financial support for both the Barbaro Gift Fund, established by two anonymous donors within days of Barbaro's hospitalization to support ongoing patient care, and the Fund for Laminitis Research, which the Jackson's helped create along with their gift to endow a chair in the name of Richardson.

One year after Barbaro's death, more than \$2.7 million had been raised for the laminitis fund and the Barbaro Gift Fund had received \$1.3 million in donations.³⁹ Following the Jackson's example, in January 2008, Pfizer Animal Health and the National Thoroughbred Racing Association, joined forces to help fund laminitis through the NTRA Charities—Barbaro Memorial Fund.⁴⁰ Last year, Dr. Hannah Galantino-Homer was appointed as lead investigator for the laminitis research initiative and Dr. James Orsini was named director of the Institute for Laminitis Research.⁴¹

In addition to establishing the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary medicine as the country's lead site for laminitis research, Barbaro's visibility created increased exposure for the teaching mission of the hospital. The vet school received a fourteen percent increase in the number of applications for admission in 2007, a figure that school officials speculated might be due to Barbaro's visibility.⁴² Certainly the eighth grade student who wrote to Gretchen Jackson about her interest in veterinary medicine being sparked by Barbaro (and subsequently received a tour of the vet school by Jackson herself) is an indication that statistic may be the beginning of a trend.⁴³

After Barbaro died, the veterinary community rallied around one of its own to applaud the tremendous efforts of Richardson and his colleagues to advance their

profession by stretching its limits. “I think the veterinary profession, from owners, to trainers, to doctors, should be proud of the way that horse was treated,” Said Gregory L. Ferraro, director of the Center for Equine Health at the University of California-Davis. “The day of the injury, there wasn’t a vet out there who thought he had much more than a nil chance of surviving. The fact that they came very close to saving him is an example for other vets to follow.”⁴⁴

Barbaro’s celebrity also advanced the cause of what many believe to be one of the sources of his injury: uneven racing surfaces. “In the wake of Barbaro’s injury, many racetracks are installing synthetic surfaces that are said to be more forgiving to thoroughbreds’ fragile legs.”⁴⁵ In fact, as of 2008, such surfaces are currently mandatory at major racetracks in California. While the jury is still out on the impact of these changes, many hope that further research into all the variables among track surfaces will help prevent injury and death to the thoroughbreds who run on them.

It is remarkable to consider that one horse had such a significant impact on a profession as well as an entire industry, but it is also important to remember that Barbaro, in part, came to be represented by the individuals who cared for him. Even though Barbaro could not tell his story himself, it is important to try and distinguish his actual narrative from the ones about his doctors, trainer and owners, a task that is often extremely difficult because they are all so enmeshed. It is perhaps similar to the situation Michael J. Fox found himself in when he initially sought to separate his role as actor from that of Parkinson’s disease advocate and “regular” family guy. When he testified before Congress on stem cell research on September 14, 2000, he seemed to reconcile the two by both situating himself as a member of the PD [Parkinson’s Disease] community and acknowledging the unique position his celebrity afforded him.

I didn’t intent to become a professional witness. I’m not a politician, nor am I a doctor or a research scientist. . . I’m a guy with PD who happens to be on TV. . . By now, many of you have heard MY story. But you haven’t heard about Brenda, a 53-year old former computer specialist. Recently her drugs failed to ‘kick-in’ and she found herself frozen in the bathtub with no one to help her. . . Her biggest regret, she now says, was that CNN was not there to provide live, up-to-the-

minute coverage of her predicament. None of these people mind that I get more attention that they do. They simply say that if I get a chance in front of a microphone—I should start talking. So here I am. Again.⁴⁶

It is fair to say that Barbaro never sought to become a celebrity nor did his owners, trainer or doctor. They were people brought together by a horse in extraordinary circumstances. Certainly none of them ever imagined that Barbaro would end up as a “poster horse” for veterinary medicine and laminitis research, or that they, by virtue of Barbaro’s notoriety, would become “quasi-celebrities” in their own rights. “Dean Richardson, chief of surgery at the New Bolton Center, has become the most famous horse surgeon in history,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported. “His quasi-celebrity is confirmed: *Dancing With the Stars* has talked to Richardson about the possibility of appearing on the show.”⁴⁷ “Before Barbaro, the Jacksons considered themselves private people. . . Now, Gretchen Jackson jokes about being careful to avoid cursing when they’re watching one of their horses run.”⁴⁸

That said, when Richardson and both Jacksons became public figures, they accepted the notoriety in the hopes that it would help others, but never, ever at the expense of the horse they were trying to save. “We’ve got a responsibility,” Gretchen Jackson told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* a year after Barbaro’s injury. “But it’s required us to be more than we are. I’ve got to pay attention to being the best me.”⁴⁹ I believe all the speaking “players” in this story, and the press that reported on them, tried to tell Barbaro’s story accurately and compassionately, but the truth remains that nothing came straight from the proverbial horse’s mouth.

There were many indications, however that Barbaro was an extremely intelligent horse that demonstrated the ability to trust his human handlers in ways that not many other typically high-strung thoroughbreds could. “Whatever ‘celebrity’ Barbaro became, he did so because there was nothing ‘ordinary’ about him. The ‘average’ racehorse would have run off with that injury, irreparably damaging his leg on the track and having to be put down right then and there,” wrote Jane Fiebert an ardent FOB and former staff writer

for two equine magazines. “He displayed extraordinary intelligence by pulling himself up and protecting his leg, then cooperating in a way that usually happens only with injured humans—and doing it over a period of many months, for most of which he was very comfortable and was definitely healing. The broken leg DID heal and he was close to being released.”⁵⁰ *The New York Times* called him “Strong, Smart and Beguiling, An Uncommon Horse,” quoting second year surgery resident, Liberty Getman who said Barbaro had the “air of a champion” and was “very smart, which is especially important for horses with orthopedic injuries.” “There’s so many things we can control and do for them to a point. But at some point they got to take care of themselves. So far he’s doing that,”⁵¹ she elaborated.

One way that Barbaro learned to take care of himself was to adapt to the sling that was hung in his stall and used to keep weight off of his feet. “He learned to sit in it almost like a dog would, to take even more weight off his front feet. When he wanted to get out of the sling in his stall, he would stand up and move to the front door. When he wanted to get into the sling in his stall, he would walk over to where it was.”⁵² He responded to his name and “became thoroughly engaged in what people were doing and why they were doing it, even willing to try new things.”⁵³ When the horse in the next stall ate grapes, Barbaro tried some too. “When he was eventually taken out into one of the back fields to graze, he would look at the school buses passing by, and when somebody yelled, ‘Barbaro,’ because the whole world knew who he was, he would look again.”⁵⁴

The role of Barbaro’s intelligence in extending his life cannot be underestimated. “You keep an injured horse alive as long as the horse is intelligent enough to know that you’re trying to help him,” explained Richard Bomze, president of the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen’s Association. “This horse seems to know that.”⁵⁵ Indeed, even when he developed what Richardson called a “catastrophic case” of laminitis about eight weeks after the initial surgery, the owners, trainer and doctor elected to continue treating him because of the horse’s “vote” of confidence. “Frankly, none of us could do it [end

Barbaro's life], because we were standing in front of his stall and he was there looking like he didn't have a care in the world," Richardson said. "We all voted, but Barbaro had the last vote, and we decided to pres on."⁵⁶

Barbaro's character and courage, demonstrated by his ability to adapt, respond and trust his human caregivers, may have indeed inspired his human caretakers to go that extra mile (although at New Bolton, they are fond of saying "At Penn vet, we try to treat every patient like a champion,")⁵⁷, but it also inspired the thousands who were following his case in the media and on-line. From the day Barbaro arrived at New Bolton Center, the hospital received thousands of letters, phone calls, flower arrangements, bushels of apples, carrots, peppermints, and gingersnaps, posters, pictures, even vials of holy water and a flag that had flown in Afghanistan, from well-wishers all over the globe. "Had she wanted to, [Gretchen Jackson] could have probably lined every inch of every wall of the house at Lael Farm with paintings of Barbaro that had been sent to her by complete strangers."⁵⁸ The core group of these supporters were those who communicated with each other on the Tim Woolley Racing website where they organized the delivery of gift baskets for the patients and staff at New Bolton, Friday afternoon pizza and ice cream parties, birthday celebrations, even a Christmas tree topped by a Barbaro ornament. Gretchen dubbed them the Fans of Barbaro (FOBs) and everyone associated with Barbaro came to be deeply touched by their generosity and support.⁵⁹ "The outpouring of affection was staggering," said Richardson. "It was really, really amazing. Most of the people who wrote in weren't horse owners."⁶⁰

Among these devoted fans were those who felt a personal kinship with Barbaro because of their own medical conditions. "A Bermuda teenager received permission to visit the equine star before she went to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. . . to be treated for leukemia."⁶¹ Mary Rose Vernace found the courage to undergo double knee replacement surgery for her rheumatoid arthritis because of what she calls, Barbaro's "amazing will to survive." "Every triumph of his was my triumph and I got so caught up

in his daily reports and the web site of Alex's that I forgot my own pain for a while. His bright eye through his recovery was my star that guided me," she wrote me. "Without Barbaro in my life. . . I am sure I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, out of fear of surgery. I would never consider it before Barbaro."⁶² When Mark Miller learned that Barbaro was not doing well toward the end of his life, he too was recovering from a horrific car accident in which he rolled his car in a Nevada snowstorm on I-80 and identified with the horse's physical pain. "As I gradually healed from my accident, Babraro was going steadily downhill. And I couldn't do a thing to help him except to know that I had a good idea of what hell was like," he said in his email. "How easily it could've been me. It probably should've been. Barbaro and I on both sides of the continent were not having the times of our lives." Another FOB wrote me that she had recently been diagnosed with a rare cancer, in stage three. "But having seen wonderful things take place through the FOB site and the courage of Barbaro, giving up never crossed my mind. . . Each day of radiation and chemo, I gather the mantle of Barbaro's bright spirit around me and leave them laughing at the Dr.'s office. I heard one say yesterday that 'she just might make it.'"

Sabina Pierce, Barbaro's official "pool photographer" (hired by Penn to feed the media outlets with images of Barbaro), sustained a life-threatening injury while covering Barbaro during his hospitalization. She fell off her horse and fractured a vertebra. "The doctors said I should have been a quad," she writes on her website. "I was med-evaced to the University of Pennsylvania Trauma Center and, like Barbaro, my joint (his was in his leg, mine was in my spine) was fused with bone from my hip. Two rods and four screws were placed in my spine (though he had many more screws in his legs!)"⁶³ Although she was back to walking a day later and back to work a week later (with the aid of a narcotic patch), Pierce's mobility was severely restricted. "It was quite challenging," she writes. "I had to spend the rest of my waking hours in bed, or in my house. Anyone would have

gone stir-crazy, but having gotten close to Barbaro helped me heal. I felt that if he could endure the pain and the setbacks, then I could too.”⁶⁴

Just as the revelation of Kylie Minogue’s breast cancer encouraged young women in Australia to get mammograms and Arlen Specter’s recovery from non-Hodgkins lymphoma motivated another with a similar diagnosis to summon the energy to leave the house, Barbaro’s illness narrative similarly inspired his fans who were in the midst of their own battles with medical conditions to “press on.” The fact that Barbaro was an animal as well as a celebrated, elite athlete certainly contributed to the power of his example, but to many, he was, like they were, a patient with a medical condition. There is no doubt, however, that the extraordinary exposure that his owners granted to the media kept the story alive and extended its influence. And it is equally significant that the story they chose to share was, in the end, about doing the right thing for the right reason. “The Jacksons were in a financial position where they could afford this highly-expensive treatment and, at least at the time of the recovery, they could have cashed in a check from their insurance carrier and effectively ‘given up’ any time after the accident. But they didn’t. They fought for something they believed in and many, many millions of Barbaro’s fans also were taken in by the courage and resolve of the horse’s attempt to recover.”⁶⁵

It was this very sense of stewardship to the horse, to the sport in which he was injured as well as to the medical treatment that almost saved his life, that has contributed to the enduring power of the Barbaro illness narrative and continues to inspire his fans to support the causes he came to represent. On the afternoon that Barbaro was euthanized, Gretchen Jackson consoled Barbaro’s fans with thoughts of activism. “I hope that we can turn our love [of horses] into an energy that supports horses throughout the world. Not just in our country and not just the thoroughbreds we love so dearly, but all horses. Each of us might find a certain path that interests us. Whatever it is, I just pray that you will follow that path in support of the horse.”⁶⁶

The FOBs took the admonition to heart and rallying around their official leader, Alex Brown, they formed a new website, www.alexbrownracing.com and devoted themselves to “improving the welfare of horses and the humans involved with them.”⁶⁷ While the FOBs continue to support laminitis research and industry reforms such as synthetic racing surfaces, their main causes have become ending horse slaughter and rescuing and supporting horses “at all stages of the slaughter pipeline.”⁶⁸ To that end, FOBs have, to date, saved more than 2100 horses from slaughter and raised more than \$850,000 in support of equine welfare issues. “Every day, people call their Congressional representatives or those in states other than their own, and ask them to bring the anti-slaughter horse bills S311 and HR503 up for a vote. This would end the transportation of horse to Mexico and Canada for slaughter.”⁶⁹

These bills, which would place a federal ban on the transport and slaughter of horses for human consumption, almost passed in 2006 when the House voted by a wide bipartisan margin of 263-146. Gretchen Jackson was among those who testified before Congress during the late Fall of 2007, while Barbaro was still hospitalized at New Bolton Center, about the importance of this legislation. Unfortunately, the war in Iraq took precedence, and the session ended without a Senate vote. The bill had to start all over again with the 110th Congress and it is currently being held up in Committee. In early March 2008, over one hundred people gathered in Washington under the banner of Americans Against Horse Slaughter to lobby members of Congress to pass this legislation.⁷⁰

This grass-roots activism is perhaps one of the few examples of an on-line community spurring offline civic engagement and is testimony not only to the power of the Barbaro illness narrative, but also to the internet that connected those who followed its every word with others who were pursuing the same goals. According to Alex Brown, his website is currently “the most significant website in the country having to do with horse rescue.”⁷¹ Brown is currently traveling around the country from racetrack to

racetrack, examining horse welfare issues, connecting with other equine advocates and blogging about them on a daily basis. When I last caught up with him, he told me Barbaro had made him a better person and that he was fortunate to be doing something about which he is truly passionate that combines all of his interests: internet marketing, horses and data management.

The Barbaro illness narrative serves many of the same functions as other celebrity illness narratives: providing national visibility to the disease of the celebrity, motivating fans who are suffering from the same or similar illnesses to endure their situations, and inspiring people to work for social and political change. And while on the one hand it is remarkable to consider that the story of a horse inspired humans to heal and carry on its legacy, it is perhaps less problematic when one considers that his story was told by and for humans. Barbaro's story, however, went beyond appealing to the human-animal bond. Because he was an elite athlete who won one of the world's most recognizable sporting events, his celebrity placed him in the unique position of being able to influence peoples' behaviors. And because he was totally dependent on his caretakers to both thrive and survive, his tale became all that more poignant and compelling. "I think there's a crying need for some high standards to live up to. There've been so many disappointments among our human athletes," said Gretchen Jackson.⁷²

In our celebrity-obsessed and perhaps, hero-lacking culture, a horse became different things to different people, but above all inspired them to look and act beyond themselves. What is especially intriguing about the Barbaro celebrity illness narrative is that it is not, as most celebrity illness narratives are, a tale of triumph over adversity in the form of a disease. The Barbaro story does not have a happy ending and that may be part of its appeal for those who wanted it to end differently. To his fans, Barbaro's struggle to survive becomes a symbol of the obstacles that many of them confront in their own lives and his persistence, grace under pressure and fortitude inspired them to "press on." And because Barbaro was surrounded by generous and compassionate caregivers

(who were crafting his legacy, intentionally or unintentionally, even as they were trying to save his life), his legacy becomes one of doing good rather than one of exploitation and self-indulgence. It is a remarkable story about celebrity power, influence and inspiration gone right even when everything else went wrong.

¹ I am using Table 1 in Groves, J. E. & Dunderdale, B. A. & Stern, T. A. (2002). Celebrity Patients, VIPs, and Potentates. *Primary Care Companion Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 4, 215-223 to classify celebrity as the following individuals: Authors (of “bestsellers”); Candidates for high office and their families; Diplomats; Entertainers; especially rock stars; Heads of state and their families; High-profile physicians; mega-rich individuals (e.g. shipping or oil magnates); members of the KGB; Members of organized crime families; Military leaders; Movie stars; notorious criminals; Politicians (local, national); presidents of nations and their families; professors (especially Nobel laureates); Royalty (down to dukes); Sheiks, emirs and the like; Sports figures.

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- ⁵⁷ Rench, J. (2008). Op. cit.
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- ⁶² I am been following the Fans of Barbaro since their inception first through the Tim Woolley Racing website and more recently on www.alexbrownracing.com. I have attended some of their events and the FOBs have come to know me as the person who is writing the book on Barbaro with Mrs. Jackson's blessing. When I posted in February that I was interested in hearing about people who were inspired by Barbaro's "illness narrative" while they were in the midst of their own illnesses, I received about twenty-five email responses, some of which I have chosen to highlight in this section of the paper. Please note that I have changed the names of the respondents to protect their privacy and edited some of their comments for punctuation, spelling and grammar.
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