



Dear Younger Me

CLEANING STALLS AS A YOUTH WILL LEAD
YOU TO MUCH BIGGER AND BETTER THINGS.

*Story by Anne Brzezicki with Katie Navarra
Illustrations by Jean Abernethy*





Dear Younger Anne,
No, you cannot keep a pony in the basement.
The neighbors in your suburban Connecticut neighborhood wouldn't like the smell. Hold onto that dream, though, because before long, your parents will move to the more rural town of South Windsor. A classmate you befriend owns horses, and she lives just a bike ride away. Her father won't let you ride because he doesn't want you to get hurt, but he will let you clean stalls.

You don't tell your parents where you're pedaling off to every day after school. Eventually, they find out. They'll be so impressed that they'll buy you three riding lessons for your birthday. When you're done, they'll buy you "Diamond," a horse the Shriners used in parades. He doesn't mind riding down the road, but when you get out on the trail, a rabbit dashing out from the brush will scare him, and you'll fall off. But that doesn't deter your love of horses. You'll brush yourself off and discover 4-H. Along with learning good horsemanship, you're going to notice that the leaders aren't judgmental about a rider's level of experience, gear or horse. File that lesson away: One day, you're going to be the one deciding whether a new rider's experience is acceptable.

When your club leader asks whether you want to attend summer camp in Massachusetts to "spy" on how it's run, say yes. With all you observe, you're going to help your county develop a camp of its own, where eventually you'll teach 500 kids a summer. It'll become your summer job until you graduate from college. And you'll meet someone important to your life there. While you're in charge of the horse activities, a man named Michael, with the hard-to-spell last name: B-r-z-e-z-i-c-k-i, will be in charge of the waterfront activities. When he asks you if you'd like to try scuba diving, say yes. It's the first of many adventures he'll lead you on, from flying airplanes to moving around the country.

During your sophomore year at the University of Connecticut, you'll hear about this brand-new organization called the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association. The organization welcomes riders of all levels, even those who have never ridden before. At competitions, a random draw pairs horses and riders to create a level playing field. UConn wants to start a school-sponsored team, so a graduate student is hired to coach. He'll leave, and when he

Rabbits that spook your horse on the trail, as well as scuba diving with your future husband, Michael, are just a few of the adventures you'll encounter as you grow your horse career.

does, UConn will be in a hiring freeze, so a replacement coach can't be hired. This will be your opportunity to step up with fellow student Duncan Peters and volunteer to coach. Together, you will lead 28 riders to a national championship in 1972, your senior year. The hiring freeze ends when you graduate, and you'll be offered a faculty position. It'll mean giving up the opportunity to ever compete as an amateur, but don't turn it down. After three years at UConn, Michael will come home and talk about a job opportunity for himself in Nashville, Tennessee. Moving away from home and a position you love is tough, but there isn't another option.

Once settled in Tennessee, you'll find a hunter barn where you can teach lessons. Before long, there's this school you've never heard of called Middle Tennessee State University, and the school is hiring an animal sciences instructor.

**He doesn't mind riding
down the road, but when
you get out on the trail, a rabbit
dashing out from the brush will
scare him, and you'll fall off.
But that doesn't deter
your love of horses.**

The program is in its infancy. There are only a handful of students enrolled in the major, and students take riding classes for physical education credit. You and Michael do a drive-by of the facility, and there's a barn, an arena and some horses, so you decide to give it a shot. Two weeks after you arrive, Dave Whitaker is hired as the director of public service in horse science. You both are excited at the opportunities a young program represents. First, you'll call Bob Cacchione, the founder of IHSA, and ask permission to host a pilot show in your region. Together with Karen Winn at the University of Kentucky, you'll host an event that brings eight colleges together for the first time to compete against one another. Your team of 28 riders—only 14 of whom had ever been out of state—have an adventure in more than just the horse sense.

On a napkin, the two of you hatch a plan to build a horse science center. Don't listen to the naysayers who tell you it's an impossible task.

Tennessee surely isn't the West. Nonetheless, there will be far more western riders than hunt seat riders. So in 1978, you'll approach Bob again and, along with Kenny Copenhaver from Miami University of Ohio, you'll convince the IHSA board that western is a legitimate discipline, and it'll be added to the class lineup. In 1979, MTSU will host the first IHSA National Championships that include western horsemanship. You'll hire Suzanne Jones, accredited as a judge for AQHA and the United States Equestrian Federation (then known as the American Horse Show Association).

After three years at MTSU, Virginia Tech is going to knock on your door. Don't turn them down—Dave is headed to Texas, and the opportunity will give you a chance to launch an IHSA team in Virginia. You won't be there long before moving to Florida to work for barrel-racer-turned-AQHA-world-champion-trainer-and-exhibitor Andy Moorman. You're going to love working for Andy. She's going to be a mentor who's smart, practical and demands excellence. More than that, she's kind. From Andy, you'll learn how to teach others to ride like you do. Andy is also where you'll learn your catch phrase, "Balance, find your balance over your leg." You'll learn to tell your riders that if their leg is behind them, they're going to fall on their faces, and if their leg is in front of them, they're going to fall on their backsides. You'll start to insist that your riders approach their horses back-to-front, riding leg-to-hand.

You're moving a lot. You and Michael have careers that make it difficult for you both to find work in the same town. Before long, you'll move back to Tennessee, where Michael had to stay for his health-care position. For the first time in your life, you won't be teaching at a college, but you'll still be a teacher at your own training barn. I need to warn you, Anne: You'll find working for yourself is the hardest job you've ever had. At times, you'll just pray for money in the mailbox so you can meet your bills. Somehow,

though, it always arrives just in time. Mud season is a big challenge when you're training for yourself: By the time you can start riding in earnest, it'll be April, and the horses will just barely be able to qualify for the AQHA World Championship Show by July 31.

In 1989, MTSU will have a part-time position open up. It might not be the paycheck you're looking for, but it works well with your business. You can start the day teaching in a classroom on campus, give a few lessons at your barn in the afternoon and finish the day back at the MTSU Livestock Center. You're not afraid of hard work, and when the administration sees you putting in 60 hours a week, the dean will say that maybe he ought to pay you for 40 of those. Dave will also come back to MTSU. On a napkin, the two of you hatch a plan to build a horse science center. You and Dave will secure a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant to build the MTSU Horse Science Center and create two new faculty positions, but it needs matching funds to work. The John and Mary Miller Foundation had funds earmarked to build a coliseum, and Dave connects the two projects to create the Horse Science Campus.

While you're teaching days and training in the afternoons, you're going to get a lot of nice horses in and a couple of great ones. You know how you like challenges? Well, Clover Bars Image and One Fresh Dude are going to provide plenty of that. Clover Bars Image is going to be a tough nut to crack, physically and mentally, but that toughness is going to contribute to his longevity. He's going to compete in trail, horsemanship and every over-fences class offered. While you're teaching and unable to travel, his owner, Elizabeth Floersch, will take him to shows without you. She'll come home and take lessons, then hit the

MTSU has a part-time position, which works with your business. You can start the day teaching in a classroom on campus, give a few lessons at your barn in the afternoon, then finish at MTSU.



Winning is great, but there are highs and lows. In your 35-year career, you'll coach 18 students who go on to become IHSA national champions, as well as multiple reserve champions and top-10 finishers.





road again for more shows. More than that, she'll actually take your advice and incorporate it. Students like that are golden, Anne. She's going to push you to be even better. Elizabeth and Clover Bars Image are going to win so many titles that you're going to forget how many there are. One title you won't forget is the 1998 All-Around Amateur at the AQHA World Championship Show.

Another great horse is going to be an even bigger challenge. One Fresh Dude is large. And gray. And opinionated. His strongly considered opinion is that he's nobody's servant. The Whitlow family will take a chance on him. If you treat him like an athletic buddy who's part of the team, he'll carry the Whitlow sisters, Lydia and Theresa, to great heights. In 2003, he'll be the year-end AQHA high-point winner in open, amateur and youth jumping.

Winning is great, for sure. But in any kind of athletic endeavor, there are highs, and there are definitely lows. One of those will come at the All American Quarter Horse Congress when a client is having the ride of her life in work-

○○

**Students like that are
golden, Anne. She's going to
push you to be even better.**

○○

ing hunter. It will be so beautiful that people are holding their breath watching the round. So when the horse takes out the last jump, the whole crowd gasps, "Ohhhhhh," and Jerry Erickson says, "Well, that was tragic," just smile and carry on like you always do. You know it's just a horse show. There will be another one next week.

During your 35-year career, you'll have 18 students go on to become IHSA national champions, as well as multiple reserve champions and top-10 finishers. You'll be proud of students Sarah Elder, Dionne Stigge, Lydia Whitlow and Kim Stewart, all of whom you'll coach to championships in both AQHA and IHSA events. But what's most enjoyable is connecting all of your students to bigger and bigger opportunities. When AQHA holds its Nutrena East AQHA Level 1 Championships at MTSU's Miller Coliseum for three years, you make sure your students have access to the top trainers and backstage access to every



aspect of the event. You've even offered their help to Tim Kimura to set poles for trail. He isn't convinced he wants their help. "Volunteers don't tend to work out for these jobs," he says. At 2:30 a.m., 30 of your students show up. A few days later, he tells you that he'd work with your kids anytime, because he was so impressed by their work ethic and attitude.

Along the way, you'll learn about an organization called the Certified Horsemanship Association, and you'll become a master instructor, clinician and board member. CHA reminds you of your 4-H days, and helping a terrified beginner become a real rider never gets old. In 2015, your students will nominate and support you to be named CHA Instructor of the Year. Then, after five decades of coaching, you'll decide it's time to retire in 2017. You've never judged a kid based on their parents, their lack of experience, or what they have or don't have. You look at students for who they are, what they could become, and you give them a chance to grow. When you leave MTSU, you'll be honored that one of the riders you've coached to championship titles—Ariel Herrin—takes your place. You want to

leave quietly. You don't want a party. So, when you find out they've organized a celebration dinner, don't disappoint them by protesting. You'll be nervous that you'll have to give a speech and that you might forget someone's name, but I promise it will all work out.

The MTSU horse science arena has never been named. The two alumni who donated the money for it, Lanas and Julie Smith of Boulder, Colorado, reserved the naming rights—and now they've decided to name it after you. Your name on the Anne Brzezicki Arena is a lasting legacy and a huge honor, but what you'll remember most is the flesh-and-blood legacy you have created, as hundreds of students return from their busy lives to say thank you. This is your moment, Anne. Relish it and look around. No one here will judge you if there are a few tears. It has been an amazing career with horses, and it all started when you agreed to simply clean horse stalls. 

The MTSU horse science arena has never been named. The two alumni who donated the money for it, Lanas and Julie Smith reserved the naming rights, and they've decided to name it after you.