

"I would not be the person I am today had I not had him for the last seven years," Nicole said. "I've had so many doors that have been opened for me because of Ace and AQHA and showing. I was really fortunate that he was able to teach me to become a better rider and really excel as an equestrian. He made me a better person, too."

"He had a good life and he was always surrounded by good people," Brad said. "He was with Rusty Green, then Ty and Karen Hornick, then Dianne Eppers and then us. He was always loved by his people. He never had a trainer that wasn't a compassionate person who cared about horses and their health and welfare."

Nicole and the Kearnses were with Ace to the very end. Nicole brought him his favorite treat, a box of Life cereal, to make sure "he knew we loved him."

"I went to visit him several times a week, and he was always in a good mood," Nicole said. "He was, to the end, in my pockets looking for treats. He never lost his spark, which made this decision that much harder."

"But you have to keep the animal's welfare the No. 1 priority," she said, with a catch in her voice. "I could have been selfish and continued to try to make progress, but there comes a point where you know in your heart they are better off not in pain. He'd been so good to us; we needed to do the same for him."

"I just want everyone to know how much he meant to me and my family."

The Barnes family initially became interested in showing when Nicole's grandfather, "Apou," started riding and put a horse in training with AQHA Professional Horseman Dianne Eppers, Valerie's mother.

"My 8-year-old daughter, Nya, asked me why this was happening to Ace," Brad said. "I said, 'You know, Nicole's grandpa is in heaven, and it's time for Ace to be his show horse.' And that's what I told Ace when I told him goodbye. I said not to be ornery because Apou was not that good a rider, and he would fall off."

"What made (Ace) a great horse was his willingness to please, to try, to pull that extra 10 percent out and put himself ahead of the pack. Ace gave his all to whoever rode him, but I think Nicole was always his favorite."

"He was a good athlete, but he had more heart than anything."



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