

Trails to Heaven

A Tribute to Gary Westphalen
By: Stephenie Bjorkman

John Wayne once said, “courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway”. These words ring true about my dear friend Gary Westphalen. Gary only 71 years young lost his battle with cancer on November 13th 2016. He is survived by his wife, Eleanor, mother Betty Roeder, brother Mark, sister Chanda Moore, his children, Kim Stockbauer, Jeff Westphalen (Jennifer), Matt Westphalen (Kendra), Justin Westphalen (Audrey) and Bobby Lester (Erin); grandchildren Zach and Maddie Stockbauer, Jeffrey, Lauren, Alex and MacKenzie Westphalen, Jackson and Hudson Westphalen and Jacob and Zane Lester.

I met Gary and his wife Eleanor in my jewelry store approximately 10 years ago. We became instant friends, and we immediately bonded over our love of horses. Gary grew up with horses and had a passion for them, but at the time when we first met he hadn't owned a horse for many years. Every time he would come to the jewelry store we talked horses. Finally one day Gary came to me and said he was ready to get another horse. He said he had a \$2000 budget for his new horse. I tried to explain to him that horses cost a lot more than they used to and that \$2000 would probably get him one that was half dead, a cripple or crazy!

Turns out his \$2000 got him crazy and wild. After about a month of having his new horse, several bumps and bruises (on Gary), he called me up and said it was time for an upgrade! I connected him with Steve Wolfe, an Arizona performance horse salesman. Gary met up with Steve and fell in love with “Gunner”. Gunner was a gorgeous sorrel gelding by none other than Colonels Smoking Gun. Well bred, great minded, he was exceptional. With a reining background, Gunner was broke, and fun to ride. Once Gary swung his leg over him, he knew he had to take him home. Gunner was the beginning of Gary's venture back into the cowboy lifestyle.

Soon after he purchased Gunner, Gary took a reining clinic with Abby Cosenza. The Cosenza program was the perfect match for him. Yes, he had ridden when was young, but Gary was very green when it came to reining horses. When Gary first started riding with Abby, he didn't even know his leads. Gary had an amazing attitude, no fear, and was willing to jump back into riding full force. With Gary's can do style and Abby and Marc's patience and guidance, he was in the show pen in no time. Gunner was the perfect partner for Gary. Gary LOVED showing Gunner! Gunner was a big stopper who stopped big every time. No matter what Gary did, Gunner took care of him. From reining, trail riding to ranch riding, Gary just loved to ride. He always made time to go to the barn, hang out with his barn friends and enjoy his love for horses.

Once Gary had the reining bug, he soon had to have another one. Gary called Steve again, and this is when he met Jac. Jac aka “Electric Sparks” was a gorgeous buckskin gelding by the late Jacs Electric Spark. Just like Gunner, Gary rode Jac and fell in love right away. He knew he was exactly what he wanted. Excited about his new horse, he immediately bought him and took him home to his trainer Abby.

Since Jac came into Gary's life, many amazing things happened. Once in a lifetime you meet that horse that changes everything, and Jac was this horse. How many times do you come across a horse that is gentle enough for a green reiner, yet an open rider can ride him 5 minutes later and mark a 73?

With just shy of 100 AQHA points, Gary and Abby mostly showed Jac in the AQHA. In the short time of ownership, Jac racked up over \$5000 in NRHA earnings, over \$10,500 in AQHA money, won multiple saddles, dozens of buckles. The biggest accomplishment was last year. Gary's dreams turned into a reality when he won a HUGE title in the AQHA ranch riding,. Abby & Jac were named the 2015 AQHA Senior Reserve World Ranch Riding Champions!! Continuing to win, this year Jac even placed in the top 10 reining for AQHA World Show's Level 2 senior reining. Besides this for 2016 Jac has earned two more saddles, multiple buckles, and other year-end awards. It breaks my heart to know that Gary won't be here to receive them.

A little over a month before Gary passed away, I watched Gary have the best ride he had ever had on Jac. Marking a 74 in the ranch riding, I will never forget the smile on Gary's face. When he stepped off to take off his bridle, he wasn't very stable, in fact Abby stood behind him to make sure he didn't fall over. My heart broke to watch my good friend, who I always pictured strong, be so weak. I had a feeling this might be one of his last rides, little did anyone know how soon his life would end.

Gary fought cancer with vengeance for over a year. Up until the past few months of his life he didn't quit going to the gym, golfing, vacationing, drinking cocktails and being a cowboy. Through all of his pain, he kept an amazing attitude and never let cancer get in the way. Gary never made cancer an excuse. With his wife Eleanor by his side, he fought it tooth and nail. Gary had no regrets. He lived his life awake and lived it to the fullest. In fact at his funeral his family joked about how a few days before he died he wanted to be put in his wheelchair to go out to the living room to have a cocktail.

Gary's funeral was standing room only. Many loved and admired him. Mark Twain said, "The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time." Gary was prepared to die. We may not have been ready for him to go, but God called upon this cowboy to take his last ride to the pearly gates. Gary's life may have had to end, but our love for him will never stop. Even if you didn't know him, when you think of this story, remember, "stop existing and start living", just like Gary did.