



LORETTA BRASHER WAS NEAR TEARS. SHE COULD HARDLY SPEAK. January 18 had been a really good day.

The executive director of the Arizona Quarter Racing Association was in Oklahoma, where she had made her first visit to Lazy E Ranch at Guthrie and that evening attended the AQHA Racing Champions Ceremony on January 18 at Heritage Place Sale Co. in Oklahoma City, where the AQHA Racing Committee honored her with the Mildred N. Vessels Special Achievement Award.

To be clear, the award named for the longtime matriarch of Los Alamitos Race Course and Vessels Stallion Farm is for work performed in the previous year. In this case, however, it might also be considered the culmination of Loretta's decades-long efforts to further Quarter Horse racing in the Grand Canyon State. That's where she has worked tirelessly to raise money and run programs such as the AQRA Scholarship Fund, stallion service auction, state-bred program and much more. Keeping horsemen informed on important issues, Loretta represents them in industry meetings, promotes racing in the press and social media and, in many ways, is the face of Arizona racing.

"Loretta Brasher is an icon in Arizona Quarter Horse racing," said Debbie Schauf, the executive director of the Oklahoma QHRA. "Loretta exemplifies the true spirit of Millie Vessels, doing whatever it takes to promote the Quarter Horse industry in Arizona."

It has been quite a journey for a woman who had nothing to do with horses or the racing industry until well into middle age. Born in Arkansas and raised through grade school by her father in Oklahoma, Loretta moved in 1956 to Safford, Arizona, where she lived with her mother while in high school. After school, Loretta struck out on her own.

"I didn't know anything about horses," she said. "I was an entrepreneur. I started lots of businesses. I had a boutique, I had two or three travel trailer and mobile home businesses. I traveled – I went to Italy, Spain, Germany, Hawaii, won trips to Bermuda and Jamaica. I was president of the Business and Professional Women's Club on more than one occasion and I was Woman of the Year in the Women's Club at Safford."

But then ...

"I married a cowboy," Loretta recalled, her eyes misting. "I met Wayne Brasher in December 1980 and we got married in July 1981. He was a cowboy and, boy, *could* he dance. I bowled with a lady's group and we always went to a dance hall bar afterwards. We didn't drink much. That's where I met Wayne. He was a cowboy's cowboy. And that's when the horses came in. I'd probably never touched a horse before then."

With Wayne showing her the ropes, literally and figuratively, Loretta learned well, helping her widely respected husband condition 474 Quarter Horse winners and the earners of more than \$1.6 million from 1983 through 2014. To the public outside the Grand Canyon State, Wayne was most famous for training Howard and Wanda Lanus' world-record-setting Pies Royal Request, the Pie In The Sky gelding who earned \$222,399 and won 26 of 54 races, including the QHBC Championship Classic (G1) in 1995 – the year "Pie" also finished second in the Champion of Champions (G1) and tied the Quarter Horse record of 14 consecutive wins in a string that began in 1994.

But that was only part of what they accomplished. Wayne

broke and first started Dale Smith's homebred Sign It Super, who went on to become the 1996 champion distance sprinter for Wayne's close friend Blane Schvaneveldt, and did the same with Gary Nesbitt's Rylees Boy, who their friend Paul Jones developed into an aged champion in 2011-12.

"Wayne started both those horses from babies, just like he did with Pie," she said. "Wayne put in the foundation – those were our babies, raised and trained in our barn."

Loretta and "Papa" – the love of her life – also had other babies, Loretta a son and two adopted children, and Wayne with three kids.

"They are all grown, so we raised grandkids and great-grandkids, too," Loretta said. "We always had a kid in our house. We had a lot of kids who didn't even belong to us, raised a bunch of them, too."

Wayne died in June 2015. Throughout their time together, however, Loretta learned not only horses but the horse business and industry. By 1998, their fellow horsemen were urging Loretta to take the reins at the Arizona Quarter Racing Association.

"Anyone close to Arizona Quarter Horse racing will tell you that Loretta Brasher is without question the backbone of the racing program in Arizona," said Schauf. "In 2016, in spite of the loss of her husband and life partner, and even with some personal health issues, it was amazing what she did for Arizona horsemen. Whether it is on the fairs or at Turf Paradise, if the horses were racing in 2016, Loretta was there. She raised money, she solicited race sponsors, she kept horsemen informed on important issues, she represented the industry in meetings with the track and regulators, she promoted racing with extensive use of social media, and she was the face of Quarter Horse racing in Arizona. Ms. Loretta Brasher truly exemplifies the requirements and spirit of the Millie Vessels award. Very few people actually know Loretta if they aren't racing in Arizona, but she is *amazing!*"

The Vessels award brought Loretta nearly to tears.

"Oh gosh," she said. "Anytime you get any kind of recognition from the people you work with every day – your colleagues and peers – well, you can't get any higher praise. I don't think you can get any higher award than that. So this Millie Vessels award means everything to me, because it means that what I do on a day-to-day basis means something special to somebody else."

Loretta paused and took a breath.

"I love my job, especially now that Papa's gone," she said. "I don't know what I'd do without my job. I love the people, I love the horses, I love the industry, I love Arizona. Maybe I'll have a little quicker bounce to my step for being recognized for doing a good job. I dunno. That just means everything to me, that the people you know and the people you work with appreciate what you're doing, that they think you deserve an award for something you've worked to accomplish. It's the best recognition you can ever get. It's the ultimate."

Loretta hesitated. She started to speak, stopped, choked back tears and tried again.

"I'm recognized," she said, in a tiny voice. "I'm so thankful. I can't tell you how much that means to me." ■

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