Once in a lifetime

One of my most vivid memories as a young child came the day my mother’s elderly gray Arabian gelding was euthanized after a long battle with colic. Two things stood out to me that day – my mom’s overwhelming grief at losing her best friend for the past 22 years and the way our long-time veterinarian guided her so gently through the most difficult goodbye she had yet to make.

For all of us that have ever owned, ridden or trained horses, there is generally one horse that stands out among the rest. That once in a lifetime horse. That forever horse that no matter what, will always be with you. It is hard to define what makes that particular horse so special. They are generally not the ones that win the most, behave the best or have textbook conformation. Instead they challenge us, change us, and become so ingratiated in our lives that losing them is like losing a member of the family.

As a veterinarian, euthanasia is one of the hardest things we are asked to do. There is a great responsibility, not only to attend to the horse, but the owner as well. When it involves one of these “forever” horses, it becomes an even greater challenge.

Just a few weeks ago, I was introduced to three such horses, with three different owners, all in one afternoon. I met a young professional with a beautiful older gray mare that she has had for over 20 years who had a mild episode of colic. The mare was fuzzy and fat, like all good retired horses, but as she told me stories of their previous show ring success it was not hard to imagine her groomed and fit, shining in the hunter ring. Another call brought me to a sly older gelding that had belonged to his current owner since he was 5 months old. She told me that he was a present from her late husband, and had always been by her side during and after his passing. A former barrel racer with a special talent for turning on faucets, he was now a gateway horse for the next generation of equestrians. Watching them interact it was obvious that their relationship went far beyond horse and owner – it was a true friendship.

Later that afternoon that I received an emergency call about an older horse who was depressed and reluctant to move. His long-time owner had just returned from a few days out of town and the concern in his voice was unmistakable. When I arrived, the big grey horse was down and having difficulty breathing. Skipping the introductions and pleasantries that are generally involved with meeting a new client, my first conversation with this man was the hardest one to have. A few minutes later, the older gentleman’s kind eyes spilled over with tears as he knelt down by his friend’s head and comforted him through his final moments.

Most people just have one “once in a lifetime horse.” While saying goodbye is never easy, as veterinarians we have the opportunity to witness so many of these special relationships. While I had never met this gentleman or his horse before that fateful day, I caught just a glimpse into their lives together as he regaled me with stories of their 25 years of trail riding adventures.
A few hours later, I returned a routine message from a new client needing a health certificate and rabies vaccination. After introducing myself the woman exclaimed “I am so excited to hear from you!” She explained that she was purchasing a beautiful brown and white paint pony for her 7 year old daughter’s Christmas gift and just couldn’t wait to get the pony shipped to her new stable. As I pulled up to the barn and saw the bright eyed paint standing patiently in the cross ties, I couldn’t help but think of how things had truly come full circle in just one afternoon. And how maybe, just maybe, this spotted, fuzzy Christmas pony was about to become one excited little girl’s “forever horse.”