Dear Younger Me: Clark Parker

Horses will always be your friends, and they won't care if you stutter.

By Clark Parker with Katie Navarra

Illustrations by Jean Abernethy

DEAR 16-YEAR-OLD CLARK,

There are some things I need to tell you.

Right now you're pretty angry – kids snicker at you when you try to speak, and the words get stuck, refusing to be spoken. Even some adults are cruel – just like that English teacher you had last year.

He knew you had a stutter. He repeatedly called on you for answers, just to upset you. Little did he know that when he ticked you off, you'd curse him out in the three smoothest sentences he'd ever hear you say.

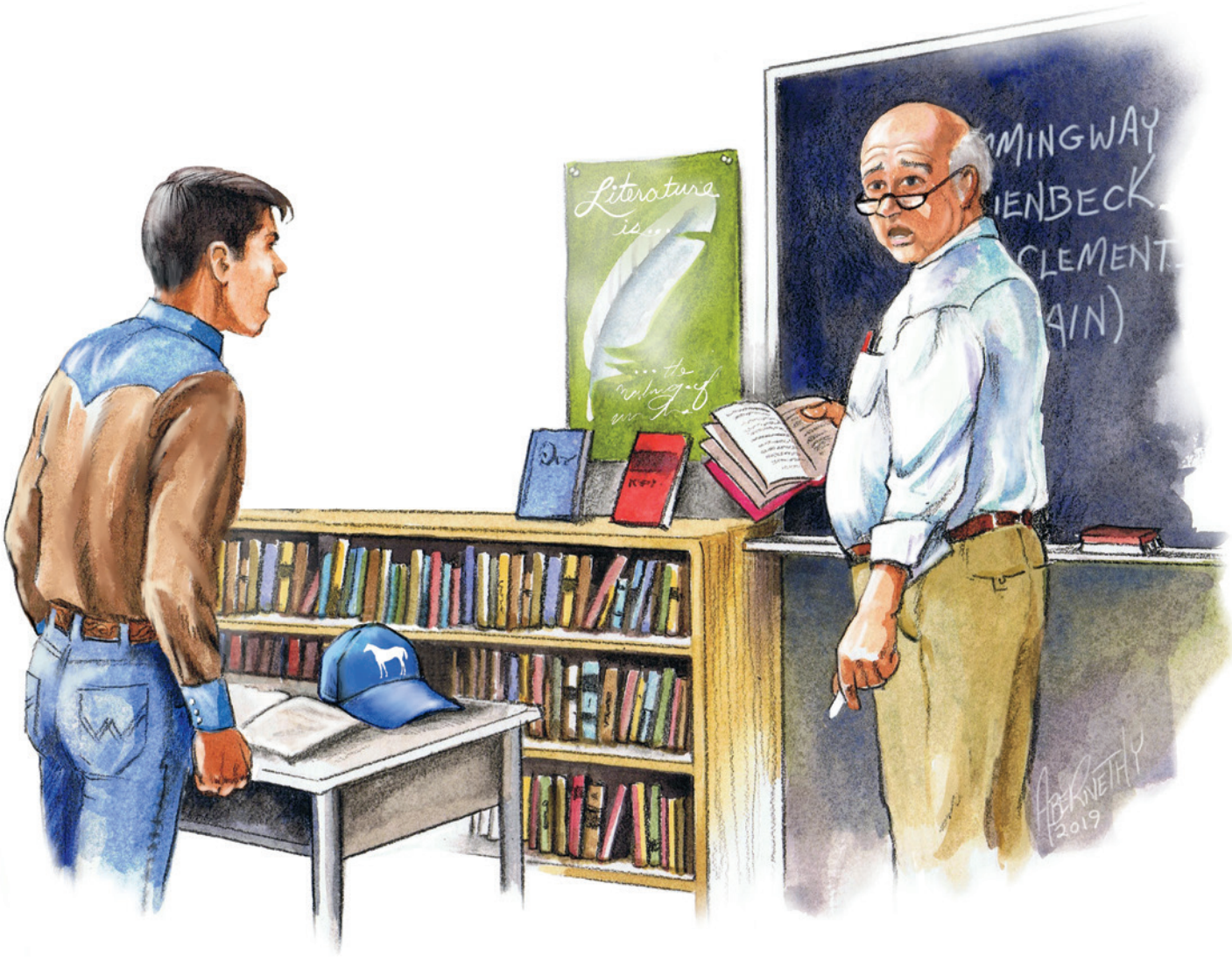
Well, shoot, it turns out the cuss words roll right off the tongue.

You've been spending summers at the University of Utah speech therapy program. Your friends tease you that you must have failed. Sometimes – a lot of times – a word gets stuck midsentence. It'll be embarrassing. Over the years, you're going to learn which words give you the most trouble and you'll try to avoid using them.

As I'm writing to you, I'm 77, and if there's one thing I've discovered, it's that having a speech defect has made me memorable. That's half the battle when you want to run your own business (more on that in a minute).

For now, when the school bell rings, head home to the family ranch at the base of Granite Mountain just outside Salt Lake City. Saddle up and go for a ride. Horses will always be your friends, and it doesn't matter to them if you stutter when you say whoa or cluck to them.

Be patient with them. Give them the respect you crave from your peers. It's easy to bring the frustration of being picked on to the barn.



Remember, if you rush the process or bully them, it'll take two to three weeks to correct what you did wrong.

Be confident. If you can't be self-assured, how can you expect anyone else to believe in you? That's a tough thing for a teenager to comprehend. When you finally realize there are so many things you can do as well as anyone else despite your stutter, it's going to be liberating.

Riding horses is one of those things you do just as well – or better – than others.

Your heart is really into roping and bull riding. Chasing a world championship bull riding title seems like a good idea once you turn 18. Soon enough, you'll find out that if you don't win a lot (which you won't), bull riders run out of money fast.

So instead, you'll work construction with your dad, who's also a farrier and shod horses for Wayne Newton. Building houses isn't nearly as much fun as bull riding, but it does pay the bills. Working on jobs with your dad is going to be hard work, especially pouring concrete, your least favorite task. But it keeps the horses fed, and you'll still have time to ride a few horses in the evening and start competing.

It won't be until 1969 when you marry Annie that you'll decide it's time to start a horse training business. To make a go of it, you'll train for a variety of events from halter to western pleasure, roping, reining and cow horse. That's really no different from any horse trainer of the time. Just wait a few years, and you'll be amazed at how specialized the horses and the trainers become.

Before you know it, your family will grow to five. Thad, the oldest, will be the only one interested in the horses. He'll mostly stick to halter horses and he'll even compete at the AQHYA World Championship Show. Andrea and Joab spend time helping you in the barn and enjoy riding, but their focus will be on other interests, and you and Annie always agreed not to force them to ride.

Watch the trainers and riders you admire. Ask questions, and learn from the wisdom they willingly share. At a show in La Grande, Oregon, Bob Avila is going to be standing at the rail. The two of you will strike up a conversation that sparks a lifelong friendship. You've known his dad for many years, but it'll be the first time you've had a conversation with Bob. This guy is obsessed with Quarter Horses, and he knows exactly what he wants to achieve. He'll confide in you that his goal is to become a National Reined Cow Horse Association Hall of Famer. Sure enough, he does.

There will always be a piece of you that wishes you were a little bit more goal-minded. Don't spend too much time on regret. Even without a formalized plan, you'll enjoy a fruitful career as a trainer and a judge.

In 2012, AQHA's Lifetime Achievement Award will be given to you. A year later, your peers will vote you the AQHA Professional Horseman of the Year.

Speaking of judging – in 1979, you'll earn your AQHA judge's card. That'll take you all over the country and overseas to Brazil, Argentina, Hungary, Dominican Republic, Japan, Germany and Columbia.

It'll be a challenge to take care of your family. Your childhood temper lingers. You're outspoken. At first, you think you're following the advice you'd received: To stand up for yourself, to be aggressive no matter what. You took that a little too seriously and when you speak before you think, it backfires. You'll have to retract and apologize on more than one occasion.

Annie will push you to become better at controlling your anger. Treat her well. You'll find out that marriages don't tend to last until death do you part. But the two of you will celebrate 50 years and look forward to decades more to come. It'll always be a joke that she's like a horse: You're getting ready to trade her in but decide to keep her because it's too much work to train a new one.

In 1998, AQHA is going to call and offer you a job.

Take it.

It means giving up the training business, the barn and house. There'll be some months you're gone for 20 days at a time. Working as a regional representative will introduce you to ranchers, cowboys, breeders and riders from the Mexican border north to the western edge of the Rockies and into Canada.

Most of these folks will be grateful to see you. The wives at some of the smaller operations will even start to cry when they realize they are just as important to the Association as the larger outfits.

Beware, not everyone will rush out to greet you. Even though you call ahead to let them know you're coming, they may be skeptical. When you're standing on the porch at a Montana ranch and two police pull up, have your ID badge handy. The rancher's wife still won't believe you. She'll call the state director to confirm that yes, AQHA has regional representatives.

After a decade of traveling on behalf of AQHA, they'll end the program and you'll return to judging. You'll meet thousands of people during four decades in the business, each one contributing to a special memory.

Your theory on friendship – the one where you believe you'll only have five friends who stick by your side no matter what – will remain true. Those friends may chew you out or be honest about a mistake you've made, but they will be there for you no matter what. And that matters more than anything, especially when your oldest son Thad loses his battle with cancer. Those friends mean as much as family.

Read this letter often.

Let it serve as a reminder not to take anything for granted and enjoy every little blessing.

Then go out and make sure your yard is in perfect shape. Spend time with your nine grandkids, pack your bags and head to the next horse show. Q

Katie Navarra is a special contributor to the Journal. *To comment, write to* aqhajrnl@aqha.org.