

Wild Horses

Beloved North Phoenix horse doctor Elaine Carpenter lived a fast life, but exhibited ultimate patience with the animals she healed

By Jimmy Magahern

Between the photos, videos and comments we post on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms, we all leave behind a tangled digital footprint these days when we cease our existence IRL.

But for Elaine Carpenter and Ted Rich, the adventurous, spirited couple who perished in an early Monday morning plane crash in August on a busy city street near the Deer Valley Airport, the digital artifacts left behind are particularly chilling.

Some, like the dashcam video of the crash itself, taken by a Valley motorist and aired on numerous local TV news outlets, have been archived by others. Preserved on YouTube, the video shows the couple's home-built Aeroduster II, its left wing stalled, throwing the aircraft into a spin and crashing into the intersection of 7th Street and Deer Valley Road just before 7 a.m. TV news helicopters picked up the video coverage from there, capturing the wreckage of the plane, painted a dark Air Force blue with a checkerboard rudder, amidst cars and emergency vehicles.

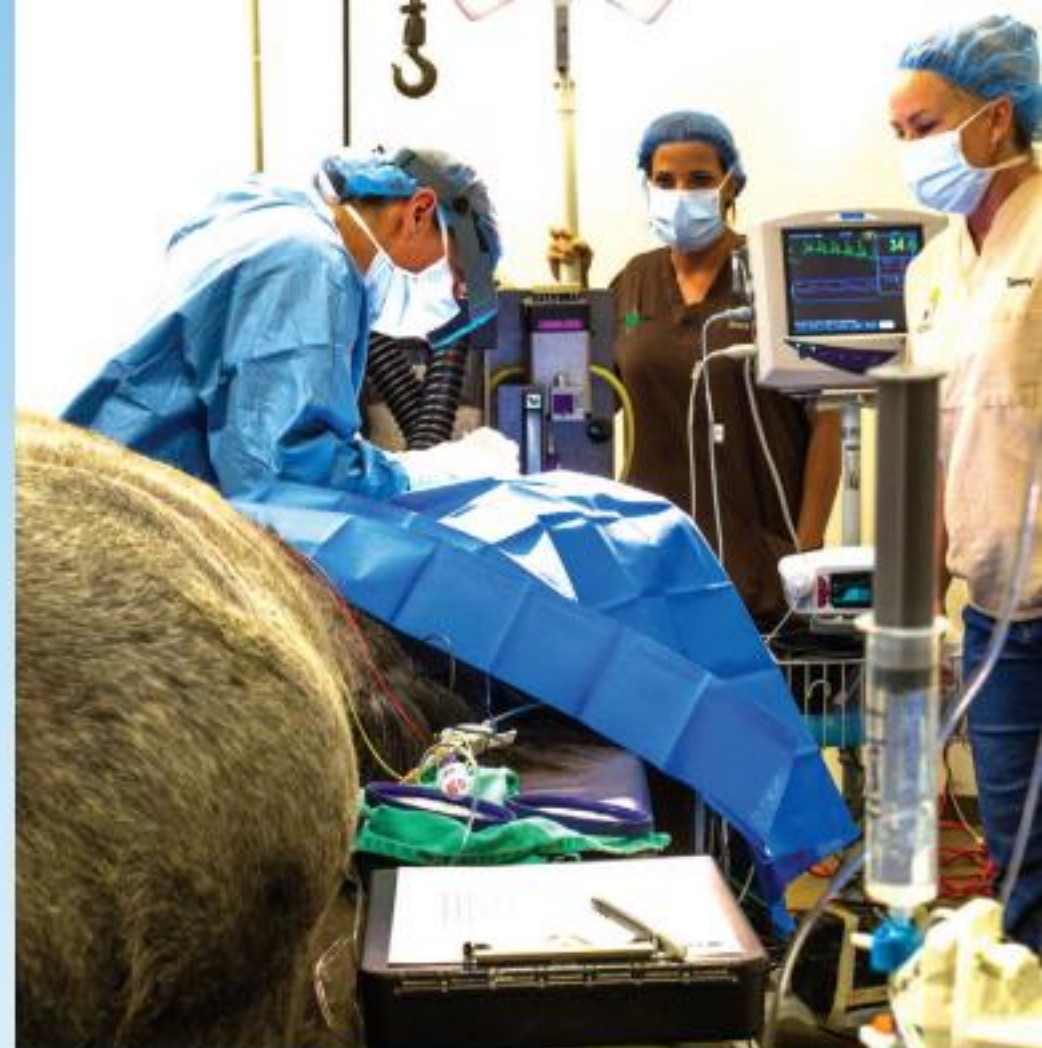
"I was watching the news that morning

and I saw that plane with the checkerboard tail, and I thought, 'Oh, no,'" says Marcia Sizemore, a friend who had known Elaine Carpenter for over 13 years. "Because I had seen that plane on her Facebook page just a few weeks earlier. She posted that they were thinking about buying it, and they had just picked it up that Saturday."

But perhaps the most unsettling digital artifact left behind is the WordPress site Rich and Carpenter created together to promote their side jobs training extreme adventurers in various dangerous exploits. The website, filled with edge-of-your-seat videos of Rich and Carpenter racing motorcycles and cars and performing barrel rolls in airplanes, is prophetically titled MillionWaysToDie.com.

"They were doing what they loved," wrote Rich's son, Josh, in an Instagram post just two days after the accident. Quoting what he said was his dad's credo, Josh, who owns the North Phoenix utility task vehicle repair shop UTV Performance Center, added, "This was always what he said and lived by. Life is short. Hug loved ones. Tomorrow [is] never promised."

The 54-year-old Rich left behind hundreds of friends and admirers in the extreme sports



Elaine Carpenter worked as a horse surgeon and equine lameness specialist at several North Phoenix animal hospitals. (Photo courtesy facebook.com/NinjaWarriorSurgeon)

community. But Carpenter, 49, is mourned not only by fellow adrenaline junkies but by aficionados of her other, more serene pursuit: caring for horses.

Apart from her identities as a motorcycle racing instructor, amateur car racer and even a finalist in NBC's *American Ninja Warrior* competition in 2016, Carpenter was a board-certified equine surgical specialist who worked as a horse surgeon and equine lameness specialist at several North Phoenix animal hospitals and taught at Midwestern University's College of Veterinary Medicine in Glendale.

"Everyone who's into horses knows that if you're going to ride, you're going to fall off a horse," says Peggy Brosnahan, a professor at Midwestern who suffered a broken leg last year in a tangle with a particularly feisty horse. "She was definitely a model for anybody who was injured where you just get back in the saddle again. She was one of those people who just seemed indestructible."

Sizemore met Carpenter around 2005, when she was looking for a veterinarian to



care for her miniature horse named Queen of Hearts.

“Queen was having some issues with her bowels and I took her into Chaparral Animal Hospital, where Elaine was working at the time,” says Sizemore, who owns a stable of miniature horses with her husband, Jimmie, and works taking care of the big horses for the Scottsdale Police Department’s mounted unit at WestWorld. “And she did exploratory surgery and found out what was wrong with Queen, which was basically inflammatory bowel disease. After that, I took Queen in to see Dr. Carpenter every three to four months, and when she moved up to the Cave Creek Equine Surgical Center [in 2011], I followed her there.”

Sizemore admits she never quite under-



Carpenter was a frequent flier with partner Ted Rich. The two perished in a plane crash near Deer Valley Airport in August. (Photo special to 85085)

stood Carpenter’s need for speed on the weekends, which became a passion relatively late in her life. At 40, Carpenter tried riding motorcycles with her sister and became instantly hooked. She met Rich, a sportbike instructor, on her first day on the track, and the two quickly became inseparable.

“I’d see videos of her on Facebook racing 200 miles per hour, and I’d tell her, ‘You’re crazy!’” Sizemore says, with a laugh. But she says that no matter how action-packed Carpenter’s life became, she always took time to ask about her horses.

“Even when she was motorcycle racing or whatever she was doing out of town, she would still text me to make sure Queen was doing okay,” she says. “I finally lost Queen two years ago. But I had her for 10 years after the surgery, which was about seven more than I think she would have lived without Dr. Carpenter’s help. And I absolutely believe

that was because of her dedication and her knowledge.”

Brosnahan saw that knowledge, too, when Carpenter worked as an adjunct professor at Midwestern University’s College of Veterinary Medicine near the Loop 101 and 59th Avenue.

“She was involved in the handling lab, teaching students how to work around horses, and then she also taught in the third year medicine classes,” Brosnahan says. “And she was a very good teacher. The thing that impressed all of us here at the university was that she was just so good with the students. You know, it takes a special kind of person to be that good a veterinarian and to also be able to teach. And she was one of those people who just could relate to the students – she was enthusiastic, she was respectful to them, and the students absolutely adored her. She was not at all arrogant or condescending, the way some people can be when they’re super smart. She was just so willing to share her knowledge.”

Brosnahan agrees that Carpenter’s adventurous life outside of work made her unique in the veterinary world, where patience and steady hands prevail.

“I can’t say that I know anybody else in my veterinary life or otherwise that was quite as extreme as Elaine – and I think that was one of the things that most of us admired about her, too,” she says. “But it’s not that unusual for people who are in veterinary medicine and work with horses to be involved in other activities that keep you fit, because it’s very physical work.”

Photos of Carpenter at work on her Facebook business page show her operating on horses lying on their backs with their legs suspended by sturdy ropes and harnesses, indicating a great deal of heavy lifting in simply preparing a steed for surgery. “You’re always picking up legs and moving the horse around, so you pretty much have to be physically fit to do the job,” Brosnahan says.

Still, Carpenter took fitness to the extreme, working out regularly in rock climbing gyms in addition to all of the motorsports she participated in. That helped prime her for her *Ameri-*

Elaine Carpenter cared for Marcia Sizemore’s miniature horse, Queen of Hearts. (Photo courtesy Marcia Sizemore)



Among her many adventures, Carpenter completed obstacle courses for the show *American Ninja Warrior*. (Photo courtesy Entertainment Tonight)

can Ninja Warrior runs, where she was able to complete the grueling obstacle course in the Los Angeles finals (although she ultimately was cut from the cast picked for the show filming) – even while suffering with a rotator cuff injury in her shoulder.

“She was having to get surgery done on her shoulder around the same time she was participating in the *American Ninja Warrior* competitions,” Brosnahan marvels. “She really was a model for anybody who didn’t want to quit, even with a physical injury.”

Brosnahan says Carpenter was an inspiration to everyone in the Arizona equine community who knew her, which makes the loss even harder now.

“If you’re riding horses, there’s always an element of danger, so we become adept at putting injuries behind us,” she says. “We all have a little of that in us, but Elaine had it in the extreme. When I had my leg broken by a horse and was going through my recovery, she was the person I thought of to keep myself motivated. Like, if I was afraid to go down a flight of stairs, I thought, ‘You know, Elaine does all kinds of crazy stuff and nothing bad ever happens to her.’” Brosnahan pauses, realizing she can’t exactly say that any more. “A lot of us are still in disbelief,” she says. “It’s hard to believe she’s really gone.” ■

