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Tonight we are honoring Mark and Renae Van Zomeren from rural Leighton. They are a couple that is blessed by a good marriage, a strong faith, a pair of twin girls whom they love much too much, and are dyed-in-the-wool Iowan farm people. But besides the blessings of faith and family, their passion together involves the American Saddlebred horse and what these magnificent horses can do for oneself and for others.

Both Mark and Renae were raised on Iowa livestock farms from families that were horsepeople. Mark learned from his good horseman father who broke mustangs and sold them. Renae lived to work cattle with a horse. Her favorite was a Saddlebred that did the job with his head held up, not down low. Both Mark and Renae in their separate times went to the Iowa State Fair and saw those "fancy" Saddlebreds and knew they needed to have some. Mark loved how the futurity colts were shown, so he bought a broodmare and got started. Renae liked the athletic performance horses and how pretty the tailored suits were. She detassled corn to raise money to buy a colt.

Mark taught elementary school for 34 years, but had his summers to do horses. Mark was one of the initial members of the Southeast Iowa English Riding Association, commonly known as the SIERA Club. Mark served as president several times for this club that organized English riding people together for various social and educational functions, including their beloved show in June. Mark also became involved in the American Saddlebred Futurity of Iowa and served as president and board member for many years. Mark believes in the futurity as a way for new people to get started in the horse business. Mark strongly believes that the futurity is not the ending place to show a Saddlebred, but rather he has encouraged and helped many people to go ahead and develop the young horses into show horses. Mark loves to tell about some of his Iowa futurity colts that have gone on to be World Champion performance horses. You'd better have a cup of coffee and some time to spare if you ask him to tell about his homebred horse The Majestic.

Renae began working young horses at Byrd Lane Stables while still in high school. But before she even really knew herself how to properly hold 2 pairs of reins, she began teaching others how to ride. Renae has a no-nonsense approach to the privilege of riding these wonderful horses. You'd better be respectful, have strong legs and soft hands, ride with poise, and make certain your suit is well-tailored. Renae attended Stephens College in Missouri and had the opportunity to teach riding and manage horse shows. She worked for a variety of good horse trainers, including Dale Pugh.

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And while believing that God does direct your path in life, Mark and Renae ran into each other during the World's Championship Horse Show in August 1984. Renae was working for a stables in Ohio. Mark came to watch the show. Of all the many thousands of seats in the auditorium, their reserved seats were close together. Mark and Renae had become acquainted years before while helping Gib Hollingsworth show futurity colts. Their acquaintance became renewed resulting in Renae moving back to Iowa. The day Mark proposed, they together walked out the plans for a horse barn on Mark's farm. How's that for romantic? They were married in August of 1985. Their honeymoon was cut short so they could return home to get horses ready for the Iowa State Fair. Again, very romantic!!

Mark and Renae began the building of their training facility that fall after selling one of Mark's homebred horses after winning the championship at the State Fair. Renae's homebred horse sold well the next year after winning the State Fair championship, so more was added to the farm. And so now the story continues. They have built their business and fueled their passions by raising and developing good quality young show horses. World and Nationally titled horses that began at Timber Hills Farm include R.S. Karneval, Absolutely A Lady, A Touch of Pizzazz, and The Majestic.

Mark and Renae have held riding camps and given lessons that have brought many new people into this industry. They've been thrilled with four world champion horses from their stables, including R.S. Karneval and Duplicate Copy for Allison Vermeer, and twice World's Champion May Issue for Allison Rohloff. Good riding equitation riders have won national Top Ten awards, including Marcy Vos, Allison Vermeer, Adrian Bell, Allison Rohloff, Samantha Thomas, Hali Steenhoek, Travis Van Zetten, Megan and Morgan McCullough, and their daughters Avis and Nadine Van Zomeren. Two former students are now working professionally as instructors and trainers, including Sara Kernen with Zubrod Stables and Katie Coup at Mike Robert's Stables.

Mark and Renae fully believe that owning and riding these magnificent Saddlebreds give more meaning to one's life than just the blue ribbons earned in the show arena. Through the years, they have seen kids learn a strong discipline and a good work ethic. They see families share time together while preparing themselves and their horses that they wouldn't otherwise do in other types of sports. The riders and families learn to work, sweat, get really dirty, clean up well, win with joy, and lose with dignity. Mark and Renae enjoy hearing former students reminisce that the times of working together with the horses are the best memories of their family times.

By the grace of God, Mark and Renae Van Zomeren, along with their daughters Avis and Nadine, hope to continue to train and teach and share the blessings this horse industry can give. They are very touched to be recognized by the Iowa Horseman's Hall of Fame with this award.

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