1988. The black sedan sped up the steep mountain like a snake winding around its prey. Gerald, the driver, was alert as he listened intently to his communications radio. I sat silently in the back seat next to a military officer named Leroy. The hillsides were barren, devoid of the wildflowers and purple lupine, so abundant in springtime. It was the last Saturday in November, 1988, and the day was cold and blustery.

“How much longer until we arrive?” I asked, as a large cow walked lazily across the road, oblivious to our presence.

“About 10 minutes,” Leroy answered in his deep soothing voice.

Upon entering the gate, we were asked to show identification. It was then I was told about Secret Service agents surrounding the area, hiding in trees, bushes and rooftops. I saw no visible signs.

I exited the vehicle and a military officer approached. He handed me a plastic badge attached to a chain. “Wear this at all times,” he stressed.

From the main gate I followed a guide for a tour of the area. The wind, blowing hard, flapped and twisted the badge around my neck, hitting my face. As two dogs yapped noisily at my feet, we entered the tack room where I
was surrounded by beautiful saddles and other equipment. All the while I had a feeling of being watched through binoculars and high-powered telescopes.

An agent arrived and directed me to a small makeshift room where I found a long narrow table surrounded by 8 chairs. I grabbed a seat, and then he entered the room.

President Ronald Reagan was about to deliver his last radio address from his Western White House, better known as Rancho del Cielo. I was one of a few select people who were privileged to sit in on the occasion, let alone be allowed on the ranch.

At the table sat two Secret Service agents, a White House photographer, reporter, the President’s press secretary and staff members. This was Mr. Reagan’s last visit as President of the United States to his special and beloved retreat.

Even though his clothing was casual, faded blue jeans, a blue long sleeved shirt, denim vest, cowboy boots and a cap inscribed with the words Ranch Detail WPD (Western Protective Division), his presence was electrifying.

Before going on air, he kidded and told jokes, making the atmosphere one of comfort and ease. I found it hard to believe that I was sitting in the same room across from the most powerful man in the world!

When he finished his address, we walked out to the grounds and were greeted by 25 uniformed Secret Service agents, all lined up with German shepherd watchdogs by their side. The President made a point to speak with each agent individually and to shake hands (paws) with their canine friends.
Then was my turn! My friend, Dennis, who was like a son to the President, took my hand and introduced me to President Reagan.

"This young lady, for the past eight years has provided vehicles for your White House Staff, Communications Agency, Military Department, White House Press Corps, and the pilot and crew of Air Force One and HMX Helicopter Squadron. We wanted to thank her for doing such an efficient and exemplary job by inviting her to your ranch."

"I'm extremely happy to meet you," the President said, his eyes squinting from the bright sunlight.

I was thrilled. His charm, warmth and charisma were not traits I expected. Mr. Reagan was gracious and appreciative, and although our encounter was brief, he left me with a lasting memory of an extraordinary individual, all politics aside.

A few weeks after my visit, I received a beautiful photograph of us shaking hands at his ranch. On the bottom of the photo there was a lovely hand written note thanking me for all my support during his Santa Barbara visits.

Even living in a small city like Santa Barbara can bring amazing perks if you just happen to be at the right place at the right time. My years of providing the president's entourage with vehicles certainly proved that incredible dreams come true.

What a story to hand down to my grandchildren and generations to come!