

Life's a beach for Nicole Branagh

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For Branagh, competing in the Olympics was a dream fulfilled that began when she was 6 when Matt Biondi, a Campolindo graduate and 11-time Olympic medalist, came to Branagh's swim practice and gave everyone an Olympic pin. "I still have that USA pin with the Olympic ring," Branagh said. "I carried it with me throughout the Olympic qualifications and brought it to the Beijing Olympics and I still keep it in my car today."

Biondi was also in Beijing doing commentary for the swimming events. "Matt came to my match and we got to hang out and chat a little bit,"

Branagh said. "I'll never forget that first meeting with Matt Biondi and the lasting effect it had on me. It all came full circle in Beijing and it was all very special."

The travel experience for Branagh was an education itself. "I was exposed to many different countries and their people," Branagh said. "Once you learned about their cultures, it wasn't a problem for anyone. It was a great experience to go overseas but there were many times when our baggage did not show up and all I had was one bikini in my backpack and a pair of sunglasses. The worst part about all the traveling was being away from family, missing out on weddings and birthdays. When you're on the road, you

can't make it back for these important events."

Even in the Middle East, competing in Dubai, the bikini outfits were not an issue. "We weren't sure what it would be like there, but we wore our normal bikini uniforms, (which my team won), and then we had to wear a coverup for the medal ceremony. We had different colored long gowns on because the prince was coming and that was their culture. We were all fine with it."

After retiring in 2018, married with two children, 7-year-old Tegan and 4-year-old Will, Branagh began to look for a new career. Having traveled all over the world, competing in Australia, Brazil, China, Dubai, Japan, Norway,

Poland, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, and other countries would certainly have qualified her for a career as a travel agent.

However, Branagh chose to utilize her degree in public relations and advertising, pursuing a career in real estate. "I was referring a lot of my friends to Julie DeCoste who works at Remax and one day she told me that I needed to get my license since I was sending her so much business and that's what I'm working on now. I really do love helping people to find a home."

Branagh still maintains a connection with volleyball. "I've been coaching at the number one beach volleyball club team in Manhattan Beach with Holly McPeak, Barb

Fontana and Erik Fonoimoana for six years. When I started, I was still playing and it was a good way for me to give back by helping the younger generation. I am also doing TV commentating with the Pac 12 network for beach and indoor volleyball."

Still, it all comes back to family for Branagh: "Fortunately, I have a supportive family with my parents and siblings. I never felt any pressure from my parents (Tom and Diane). They always encouraged me to do what I loved and were always there to support all of us with our passions and we're very thankful for that."

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