



MARY HELEN SHAUGHNESSY

KNOWS WIHS FROM THE GROUND UP

By Lindsay Brock

How did the show jumping industry become a part of your life?

I started riding very casually while on vacation as a child in Hilton Head, South Carolina, and that grew into taking lessons in the local Maryland area. When I was around 13, my family bought a cute Paint lesson horse named Bruce and kept him at a farm where we took care of him ourselves. I always wanted to ride more competitively on the show circuit, but my parents wanted to be sure my interest was serious enough, given the investment and time commitment.

I started my first serious show riding when I was 15 with Beverly and Elizabeth Solter, who took me to WEF for the first time and

Mary Helen Shaughnessy has experienced the Washington International Horse Show (WIHS) from many different angles — as a wide-eyed junior rider watching her heroes and as a nervous competitor at the in-gate. She's also traveled the world exploring various roles in the show jumping industry. All those experiences came full circle in March when she was named executive director of WIHS.

Mary Helen's roots run deep in show jumping circles. In fact, her mother, Mary K. Shaughnessy, hails from Washington, D.C., and attended the inaugural Washington International Horse Show in 1958. Mary passed down a passion for horses to her daughter, while Mary Helen's father, Dennis Shaughnessy, a Baltimore, Maryland, native, inspired her business savvy. The former chairman of the board at FTI Consulting, which was once the title sponsor of the Winter Equestrian Festival (WEF), he also became involved in show jumping at a corporate level.

Combining the talents she drew from both her parents, Mary Helen has competed in show jumping internationally, attended New York University's film and law school and worked in development and sponsorship for some of North America's most elite equestrian events. After horse sport and a career led her to all corners of the world, Mary Helen and her husband, Dan Pardue, recently returned to where it all began — her hometown of Baltimore — to work as the executive director of WIHS.

introduced me to the world of children's jumpers and hunters. With them, I got my first show horse, a former racehorse turned children's jumper with the very regal and dignified name of Chad. Chad and I had a very interesting show strategy of either winning or me falling off at the first fence. I also had a lovely children's hunter, Oyster Pond, who would win every hack class but didn't do lead changes. I'm happy I had some unique horses to start out as I learned the humbling nature of the sport and also how to

stay determined and hopeful through all the ups and downs.

Where did you go from there?

When I turned 18, I started riding with Jeffery Welles and that's when I really elevated my riding and started competing in the amateur-owner jumpers at shows all around the world. I

Above photo:
Mary Helen and Haarlem at the Winter Equestrian Festival in 2006.
Photo by ESI Photography

had a truly amazing horse, Haarlem, or Harry, who was actually the horse that Kent Farrington won his very first grand prix on. With Haarlem, I won championships at virtually every major show including internationally at Valkenswaard and Spruce Meadows.

During this time, I also got to travel with Jeffery as he was on the U.S. Nations Cup teams and saw the highest level of sport from an inside perspective, which was fascinating, especially at a time when the USA was really

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~Mary Helen Shaughnessy

growing in terms of international success. My time at Jeffery’s barn provided the foundation for me to compete and win at a level of the sport that I had only dreamed about, and also see the inner workings of the industry as a whole.

After my time with Jeffery, I rode with Kent and continued to advance in the jumpers. I got another wonderful horse, Loriot 265, whom we called Larry, who was as quirky as they come but an incredible partner. I consider myself extremely lucky to have had two “horses of a lifetime” in Harry and Larry. Larry and I also won many championships, including at the Hampton Classic and WEF. Kent has an uncanny ability to match riders with horses, and I was lucky to find Larry because of that skill. The level of enthusiasm and support that Kent is able to give his students is something I try to emulate in my professional life.

How did your position with WIHS materialize?

I was living in New York and had recently worked as media and communications manager on the attempted efforts to launch the New York Masters at the Meadowlands. Unfortunately, that didn’t work out, but I really enjoyed learning all the facets and pieces of putting on a show from the inside out.



Mary Helen is now the executive director of the Washington International Horse Show.
Photo by Shelli Breidenbach

At the same time, I was trying to find an excuse to move back to Baltimore, my hometown that I fiercely love. I saw a job at WIHS for a sponsorship coordinator and thought it could be a good fit given my background. Over the past four years, I grew into the sponsorship and hospitality director, then development director and now executive director.

What makes WIHS a special show for you personally?

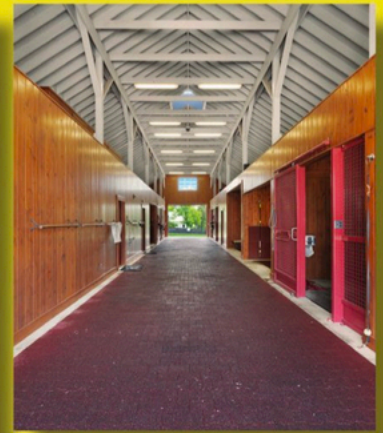
Right around the time I started riding, I remember walking the concourse, ordering a pair of custom chaps, and then watching Margie Engle warm up for the grand prix. It was the first time I felt like I was actually close to this sport that I’d always admired from afar.

I also have the distinction of having fallen

off twice while competing at WIHS. First was with Chad, when I fell off at the first fence in the children’s jumpers. Then, the following year, I competed with my junior hunter, New Hope, and we had to open a gate and walk through in the handy hunter. That did not go my way; I fell off again. Showing at WIHS was certainly not a success story for me, but I always loved attending and I do feel like I can boast having been able to experience the show from all sides: as a rider, spectator, organizer and as someone who has gotten up close and personal with that arena floor.

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to experience the culture of the city. Though it is a challenging show, there is an undefinable special feeling that WIHS brings to not only its riders, but also the thousands of fans who come to watch, many laying eyes on a horse for the very first time.

When you aren't working or riding, where can we find you?

I'm either traveling the world or on my couch watching Netflix with my basset hound, Avon. My husband and I have a definite sense of wanderlust and love to travel places near and far, whether it's a honeymoon trip to Russia or a road trip to see all the presidential libraries throughout the United States. That's all tempered with a love of staying in and streaming TV shows, which is sometimes the best vacation you can get — especially when accompanied by a basset hound. **SI**

For more information, visit www.wihs.org



Mary Helen Shaughnessy
Photo by Sherry Pickerell Photography