

BARBARA PHILLIPS



For Barbara Phillips, living the dream means combining two unlikely worlds: horses and computing. Her passion for horses has followed her through school and a technology career with major companies; now, she's using her knowledge to advance the horse show industry with Equestrian Connect, revolutionizing paper and mail-in entry forms with quick, easy online entries. She's also sharing the horse hobby with her family, just as her father first shared it with her.

Barbara grew up in Ohio, where her love of horses started early thanks to a horse-loving father. "My dad raised and showed his homebred horses," she remembered. "It was a hobby for him, but he could have easily gone professional. He had Saddlebreds when I was really young, and then migrated to Quarter Horses and ponies. I got the bug and loved working closely with my dad. He was a quiet person, but very funny and so encouraging. He could always figure out a job for any horse."

Barbara learned reining and rode Quarter Horses all through college in the mid-80s, where she discovered another passion. "I thought I'd get a finance or accounting degree, but when I took my first computer class, I fell in love with how creative it was and how you could make things easier for people. I became a big believer in the computer revolution."

Barbara Phillips

Isabel J. Kurck Photography

THE DATA BEHIND A LIFE LOVING HORSES

By Britney Grover
Portraits by Isabel J. Kurek



Barbara and Alberta competing at Thermal
Photo courtesy of Stu Phillips

FIRST CAREER

Her career in computers kept her in Ohio at first after college, working for Federated Department Stores (FDS) — the owners of large retail stores like Bloomingdale's, Marshall Field's and Lord and Taylor. "After spending a year helping to complete the integration of a major payroll system, I was offered the opportunity to research and develop a strategy to centralize FDS's retail inventory systems across all their stores," Barbara said. "While this would sound boring to most people, it gave me hands-on experience to understand the complexity of streamlining processes that would permit easy access to accurate information and end-duplicating data." Though she didn't know it then, she was gaining the experience needed to launch Equestrian Connect — and she was still able to ride her Quarter Horses.

After FDS, Barbara moved to Chicago. She worked briefly for a corporate real estate company before founding her first startup technology business. IRIS offered fortune-500 companies a way to manage the real estate they owned or leased, and clients included Kraft General Foods, Baxter Healthcare, DuPont, Prudential Insurance, EDS, Bank of America and more. The company was doing well, but horses were harder to come by in Chicago; the nearest stables were 90 minutes from her home, and she traveled extensively for business.

However, Barbara couldn't stand not having horses in her life. "I was traveling a lot to New York City for work, and during that time I actually found a stable on the Upper West Side that leased me a horse so I could go for rides through Central Park," she said. Barbara had stumbled upon Claremont Riding Academy, the oldest and last operating public horse stable in Manhattan — which led to some memorable experiences.

"It was a blast. The funny part was I would ride the horse down Columbus Avenue to get to the bridle paths at Central Park on the same roads with cars and taxis," Barbara said. "I remember riding up West 89th Avenue and stopping at a stop. When I realized I was at a stop light with four lanes of traffic and about to cross Columbus Avenue, I thought, Arizona, I hope you're everything that Claremont promised you were ... and he was: a trouper that knew his job perfectly. He was my New York City horse for two years."

Barbara founded Equestrian Connect, revolutionizing paper and mail-in entry forms with quick, easy online entries.





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Barbara and NZ Isabella
Photo by Elena DeSanti

A SIMPLE IDEA

In the mid-90s, Barbara decided to relocate IRIS — and horses played a role in that decision. “When I was deciding where to move the company, it was between Palo Alto, Seattle and Dallas. After visiting the locations, I loved how close the riding stables were to Palo Alto and thought I actually might be able to get back into riding on a regular basis.”

After moving to Palo Alto, California, Barbara was finally able to get horses back into her life — but it wasn't Quarter Horses. She couldn't find anyone with reining horses, so she had to learn an English discipline. Both Palo Alto and jumpers have stuck for over 20 years. Soon, Barbara was competing with multiple horses at shows around California.

After years of filling out entry forms and dealing with the hassle of mistakes and holdups, Barbara's past experience gave her an idea. “I thought, How hard could it be to develop a service that would streamline the entry process for hunter-jumper shows? I'd been doing entries for my four or five horses for quite some time and initially looked for a product or service I

could use. There was nothing out there that was available anytime, anywhere, for all hunter-jumper shows. So I decided initially to build something for my own personal use.”

What began as a personal project turned into Equestrian Connect, which was launched in

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2009. “Change is hard and that was certainly true when I started Equestrian Connect; possible users weren't sure what it meant, how secure and reliable it would be,” Barbara said. But it wasn't long before people began to see its merit — especially people like Robert Ridland,

Stephanie Wheeler and Melissa Brandes of Blenheim EquiSport. “They contacted me and wanted a better way for exhibitors to submit their entries. That was a huge success; exhibitors didn't need to mail or overnight their entries anymore.”

Now, Equestrian Connect has a team of six professionals and posts entry forms for over 800 USEF shows in the U.S. and 30 in Canada. “The company continues to grow every month with new subscribers,” Barbara said. “Owners, trainers and riders ideally only want one place they can do their entries easily and be submitted to any show they want to enter. Show managers and secretaries don't want to have to rekey data into their show management software because that costs time and money. And everyone — USEF, the shows and exhibitors — wants accurate data. I'm a very positive person, so I remain hopeful others will eventually understand the benefits for all parties involved and that in the end it will be a good thing for the industry.”

THE GOOD LIFE

While she pursues streamlining information flow between USEF, Equestrian Connect and show management softwares, Barbara currently enjoys competing her three jumpers around the country. In 2017, they traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico, for three weeks and spent the winter season in Wellington, Florida, at the Winter Equestrian Festival — though Barbara injured her ankle and had to pass riding her horses on to Andy Kocher. This year, Barbara hopes to spend time in Colorado, Kentucky and on the East Coast in addition to shows in California.

“Like my father, I hope to ride and compete as long as I can. I truly love it ... the shows, the people, the horses, constantly training and learning.” Her father, who passed away in 1996, stayed involved with horses as a breeder and owner even after his health prohibited him from riding. Now, Barbara is continuing the equestrian tradition with her own family.

“My whole family rides in varying degrees,” she said. “My husband, Stu, is British and really enjoys trail riding. He’s always liked horses and watched show jumping when he lived in England. When our kids were 8 and 10 years old, we went to a couple of dude ranches in Colorado and Canada. Everyone loved it, but our daughter, Carolyn, really got the bug and wanted to start riding more seriously. She rode jumpers successfully up through 1.30m, then rode ISHA at Wellesley College. She stopped competing in medical school but found a barn she could ride at once or twice a week. Our son, Kevin, enjoys trail riding also — but much prefers skiing as his sport.”

And when it comes to Equestrian Connect, Barbara is happy to combine her life’s two greatest passions. “I never imagined I would be doing something like this,” she said, “but it’s the best of both worlds. I’m able to continue with my hobby of riding and showing my jumpers as well as utilize my academic and professional training of developing computer software. Both are very creative and unpredictable in so many different ways, but the challenges and problem-solving techniques are quite similar: Both take endless dedication and commitment as well as a willingness to persevere in figuring out how to make things work best.” ■

For more information, visit EquestrianConnect.com.

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