

By TOM DIDATO

New York City native. Dartmouth College graduate.

Nothing in Donna Freyer's past screams out -- or even whispers for that matter -- Thoroughbred trainer. But yet, there is nothing she would rather be doing than working with horses on a daily basis from her distinctive quarters at the Blue Barn on Carter Street in Camden.

With the melodic sound of horse hooves clip-clopping in the background as they were walked around the shedrow at Freyer's Custom Care Equine, the staple of Camden's permanent training colony smiled when asked how she decided she wanted to be around horses. All Freyer could remember was that it came to her at a young age while growing up and living with her family in an apartment in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan.

Did her earliest memories of seeing horses on television involve watching the Kentucky Derby or another of the Triple Crown races, she was asked. Suddenly, the grin turned into a full-fledged laugh.

"I don't know if it was the races that I was watching," she said as her eyes lighted up. "I don't know if I saw a horse on TV ... wasn't Mr. Ed on in those days? It was probably Mr. Ed.

"It wasn't racing, it was just a horse. I really can't tell you what it was."

Had a talking horse led to one's being enthralled by the equine world, it would hardly be the first time television molded a youngster's dreams and aspirations. In this instance, however, Donna Freyer followed through and let nothing else get in her way, not even attending and graduating from an Ivy League institution.

The horse reins tugged at Freyer to the point that when the family left New York for the New Jersey suburbs, she was able to find open spaces and horses. Like many a young girl, her first association with horses came from taking riding lessons. What was different in Freyer's case, however, was that once she got to the farm, she stayed there.

Her father would drop her off at the barn on his way to work and then pick her up on his way back home that afternoon or night. "I would stay there the whole day. I fell in love with it," she said as that smile returned to her face. "All I did was horses and school. I was a nerd. I did really well in school."

Before long, Freyer became an "A" rated pony club rider. She started to fox hunt and earned her colors at an early age and was a whipper-in at her hunt club. She rode show horses and focused on three-day eventing and had a jumper who could show as well as hunt. With each passing day, Freyer's involvement with horses grew deeper to the point where she was hell-bent on making it a career. But riding at the sport's highest level was not in the cards.

Fortunately for Freyer, while the horse thing was seemingly at a plateau for her, she had a sterling high school resume to fall back on. Her grades opened doors to schools such as Middlebury, Princeton and Swarthmore. For the longest time, however, the entry way to Dartmouth was closed to Freyer and all

females. That all changed in 1972 when Dartmouth's Boards of Trustees made the decision to make the Hanover, N.H., institution co-educational.

Having nothing to lose, Freyer wrote a letter of application and, to her surprise, she received a scholarship to Dartmouth. One might have thought getting into the Ivies would have been the end of the trail for someone who loved horses. Not so here. Read on.

"Fortunately," said Freyer, who learned to ski on the school-owned slopes and worked on the Dartmouth school newspaper, "there was a great evening family up there, the Perkins. Beth Perkins was on the team and so was her little sister, Bea. I got back into the riding again. So, again, I was just doing school and horses."

While working with the Perkinses, she received her first taste of South Carolina, riding the family's horses. With a dream of earning a spot on the United States Equestrian Team, Freyer continued to ride after graduation from Dartmouth rather than looking for a job in some stuffy office building. She was with the Perkins family and trained in Aiken one winter with a horse who had come off the race track and that she hoped would carry her to the Olympics. That went up in smoke when President Jimmy Carter ordered a U.S. boycott of the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow as a protest of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan.

When her lone horse became sick and had to be nursed back to health, Freyer had no alternative but to find another way to make money. Naturally, that was to stay in Aiken's riding community.

Aiken to Delaware to Camden

"So here I was in Aiken with no horse, no job and, back then, when you were a working student, you were a slave," Freyer said in recalling her plight at the time. "Somebody said, 'They'll pay you to ride horses down the street.' So, I started galloping horses and I got hooked.

"That was when Aiken was in its glory. The Phippses were there, Greentree was there, and Mack Miller was there ... that was its heyday. All the great horses were there. That was before Florida took off and took a lot of the great horses out of (Aiken and Camden)."

While in Aiken, Freyer worked for Bruce Johnston, a trainer for the Phipps family stable. That opened doors for her to expand her horizons. Before long, Freyer took a job working for George Thomas and was later headed to the track for the first time with Thomas at Delaware Park. It was there where she received her first introduction to trainers with Camden connections.

"Gerry Goswell was still there training," she said of working at a facility which had former Camdenite Austin Brown as its general manager in those days. "Mr. (Bobby) Davis was still there, Joey Rusham was there, Dickie Small was there, and Janet Elliot had horses there. It was a great place to be. I was lucky. I saw Delaware Park at its best."

Virtually any story on trainers in Camden wouldn't be complete unless there was a tie to Hall of Fame trainer Frank Whiteley. Freyer's tale is no different than many others.

While at Delaware Park, she ran into an old friend from Jersey, trainer Andrea King, who set up shop in Camden in the winters. It was King, a Whiteley assistant, who told Freyer that if she wanted to make her mark in the business she had to go in a new direction. "Andrea said, 'If you want to do this right, you need to work for the best. You need to go to Camden and work for Mr. Whiteley.'"

At the time, Whiteley still had horses for Claiborne Farms and select other clients which Freyer would gallop while spending her summers in Camden. Among the influential people she met here was Wilhelmine Waller, the wife of trainer Thomas Waller. Mrs. Waller took an interest in Freyer which would pay off soon thereafter.

It was Whiteley, however, who told Freyer she needed to walk on her own two feet after he deemed her ready to become a trainer. So, with just a 24-hour notice, Whiteley told Freyer she was going to Maryland with five horses and needed to get her trainers' license.

Long story short, the five runners dwindled as Murphy's Law became a credo for Freyer's string. One horse won a race and was running well before moving on. Another horse broke its leg training in the morning and another got sick. "It was a disaster," Freyer said of a rude introduction to a tough business. "Here I was with one and a half horses in the middle of the summer in Maryland. Then, I get this phone call and it was 'Dearie, I hear you're in trouble. I hear you need a job.'"

The unmistakable voice on the other end of the line was Wilhelmine Waller, who continued keeping tabs on Freyer.

"I said, 'Yeah, I probably do.' And Mrs. Waller said, 'I need somebody to come to Saratoga and help my husband.'"

That one call and job offer led Freyer to Saratoga and taking a job with Thomas Waller as assistant to the veteran trainer who oversaw Tanrackin Farm. Thomas Waller passed away several years later and Freyer took over the stable and, for 10 years, trained in New York including the first year of winter racing there, even though, Freyer said, Wilhelmine Waller was adamant in her objecting to racing in the winter months. Instead, she returned to her home in Camden, as she did each winter.

Most of the horses in the Waller barn were homebreds and came to Camden to freshen up under Freyer's watch during the winter months. Those runners would come relaxed and ready to run off the farm after having had the winter off. The winners she had in the spring, Freyer said, were those who ran against horses who stayed in New York and raced year 'round. "Horses from Camden just ran really well when they were fresh," she said.

As Wilhelmine Waller got older, she started scaling back her operation. "I could see the writing on the wall ... that they weren't going to do this anymore and they weren't going to keep Camden open anymore," Freyer said. But Waller wasn't done looking out for Freyer.

Staying in Camden, for keeps

“People have always been good to me,” Donna Freyer said as she sat back in the chair of her office located a short stroll from her residence. “(Mrs. Waller) gave me the house and farm down the street. I had a place to live, so I figured I would go back to Camden and see if I couldn’t make a go of it breaking and training horses.”

Freyer’s connections in New York paid off as she ventured into her fledgling business of training younger horses, freshening up those who had come off the track for rest and relaxation away from the hustle and bustle of the races or those who needed time to recover from injury.

“Most of Mrs. Waller’s horses started to go to Finger Lakes (in Upstate New York), so I went back to the farm for a while,” Freyer said of the early days of her stable. “Mrs. Waller had a beautiful farm in Westchester County and she had some good show horses and I went to a few shows with her last good show horse, Cheer for the Team. We made some inroads in the show world and we also got some layups from Belmont and Sue Vitro, who managed the farm, and I called ourselves Custom Care.

“When I came down south, I called it Custom Care South. Then, somebody said that it sounded like a nursing home, so I called it Custom Care Equine.”

This past winter, some 50 horses called Custom Care Equine home; half of that figure were runners needing time away from the track or the show ring for one reason or another. “Half of this barn is for older horses,” she said as another horse passed in front of the window overlooking the stalls and paddock. “Sometimes, a change is as good as a cure. If they get out of that (competitive) environment, even for two months, it’s amazing.”

Freyer and CCE survived but hit a lull in 2012 when the economy dealt the equine industry a body blow and the foal crop was a small one. Her barn also had some of its older clients who either passed on or got out of the business. One year later, business came roaring back. “We just continue to try and turn out a good product,” she said, no matter the number of horses on the grounds.

Being an operation that needs young horses to carry out its job, Freyer will go to the horse sales in Saratoga and other venues, selling CCE to owners looking for a place where their young Thoroughbreds will be cared for and not be just a number as is the case in some operations in other parts of the country where 200 to 300 young horses are trying to make their way to the race track.

One of Freyer’s most loyal and trusted clients is Stuart Grant, owner of Elkstone Group LLC and owner of The Camden Training Center on Chesnut Street. Having someone like Grant, who saved the Camden Training Center by purchasing it, in her corner provides a safety blanket for the operation.

As for personnel, the key to any operation is attracting, and then keeping, good help. Some of her current core help, grooms and an assistant trainer have been with Freyer for more than 10 years. The challenge for virtually all barns is finding enough quality and experienced riders. That profession, she said, is starting to become a dying breed. Trainers are always on the lookout for good, reliable riders and when they find them, they try and keep them.

“Riders are getting to be at a premium,” she said as to one of the most challenging parts of her job as an employer. “I think less and less people are doing it. It’s hard to find young people who want to get into the business, in any aspect.

In an effort to remedy the situation, Freyer brings aboard a student from the University of Delaware. The 10-week internship is sponsored by a foundation established by Stuart and Suzanne Grant, who reside in Wilmington, Del.

“They learn everything from training a race horse to driving a tractor,” Freyer said of the learning experience which the intern undergoes at Custom Care Equine. The highlight of the summer for the student is attending the Fasig-Tipton July Yearling Sales in Lexington, Ky.

“The success rate is high, so far,” Freyer said of the program. “Two (former interns) are in veterinary school while a third was just accepted to the Irish National Stud.”

From CCE’s stalls have come multiple graded stakes winners such as the Thomas Bush-trained Get Stormy, whose resume included three Grade I victories on the turf including the \$500,000 Woodford Reserve Turf Classic at Churchill Downs on Kentucky Derby day in 2011. In his career, Get Stormy made 11 trips to the winners’ circle in 31 starts and brought in more than \$1.6 million in earnings.

Banrock is another CCE success story. Broken by Freyer as a baby, the Go for Gin gelding won 12 times while finishing in the money nine other times in a 39-start career in which it earned \$830,815. Banrock returned to Camden each winter to unwind at CCE before returning to the track in the spring.

Her job is to prepare horses to get to the track, and Freyer is content to watch her barn’s graduates from afar and know that she had something to do with their success and the development.

“I guess if I had a big stake horse, sure, I’d like to be at the track,” she said. “But there’s so much moving around and it’s expensive having to find a place to live. I go to Saratoga for three weeks and I’m ready to come home.

“I like Camden. I like it quiet. I like having my animals and my garden.”

With Camden’s laid-back style, Freyer can train at her own pace without hurrying a horse to get ready to run. She also has free time and she has engrained herself into the fabric of the community. With her diversity of interests, Freyer is or has been involved with the Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County, the Kershaw County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, the Springdale Hall Club, The Hospital Foundation and the Camden Landmarks Commission.

Freyer was involved with the founding of the South Carolina Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation’s Second Chances, an endeavor of which she said she is proud. The intensive six-month program provides inmates at the Wateree River Correctional Institution and retired Thoroughbreds with a second chance as inmates learn marketable job skills for the equine industry while providing the horses a safe and caring environment as opposed to being forgotten when their days at the track were finished.

“That was one of the best things that I ever did,” she said of her association with Second Chances initiative. “It’s a great program and it educated a lot of people about the problem. The prison system program is great.”

An ambassador of the Second Chances endeavor, Freyer plays the same role in selling Camden and its rich Thoroughbred tradition and industry. While it may seem as if getting horses to train here would be a slam dunk proposition, Freyer said the landscape has changed in terms of where owners and trainers can send their young runners to be developed.

Camden is in competition with equine bases in Aiken and Florida, to name just two sites. But as is the credo of virtually every person in the town’s training community, all it takes to sell the training centers is a few hours to see all that Camden has to offer.

“If you can get them here, Camden sells itself ... It’s just getting them here,” Freyer said with a hint of resignation in her voice.

“We just have to get Camden back on the map. All boats will float then. Even if business doesn’t come to us, maybe we can get another big outfit here and having critical mass. We could also build an equine hospital here, which would also help attract more business.”

Freyer cites trainers such as Jamie Woodington and Hall of Fame conditioner Jonathan Sheppard, who ship their runners to the race track, with great success, from Camden. “Todd Pletcher came here once to visit and just loved it,” she added. “If we could just get someone like him to send a string of horses here, it would help.

“People have this misconception that it’s hard to get here. But we’re pretty well located.”

Shaking her head as she talked about the battles she and other trainers fight in trying to get people to send their horses to Camden, you might think that Donna Freyer is ready to raise her hands and give up. But that isn’t in her DNA.

Remember, this is someone who followed her dream from being raised in a small apartment in New York City to graduating from Dartmouth to doing what she loves in working with horses, surrounded by nature. She said her career started snowballing to the point where she was in it for keeps and couldn’t go back and switch direction.

But what if there was a chance to go back, take her Ivy League degree and follow a different career path? Donna Freyer stopped and paused for a moment when asked if she would change anything, if given the opportunity for a life “do over.”

“Sure, I would like to come back in another life, do something else and see what I could have done with my degree,” she said as she leaned back in her chair. “There are other things that I like to do.

“Would I have been happy doing something else? Maybe, if it really took me like this did. But I never gave anything else a chance to find that out. But do I regret what I’m doing now? No, not at all.”

