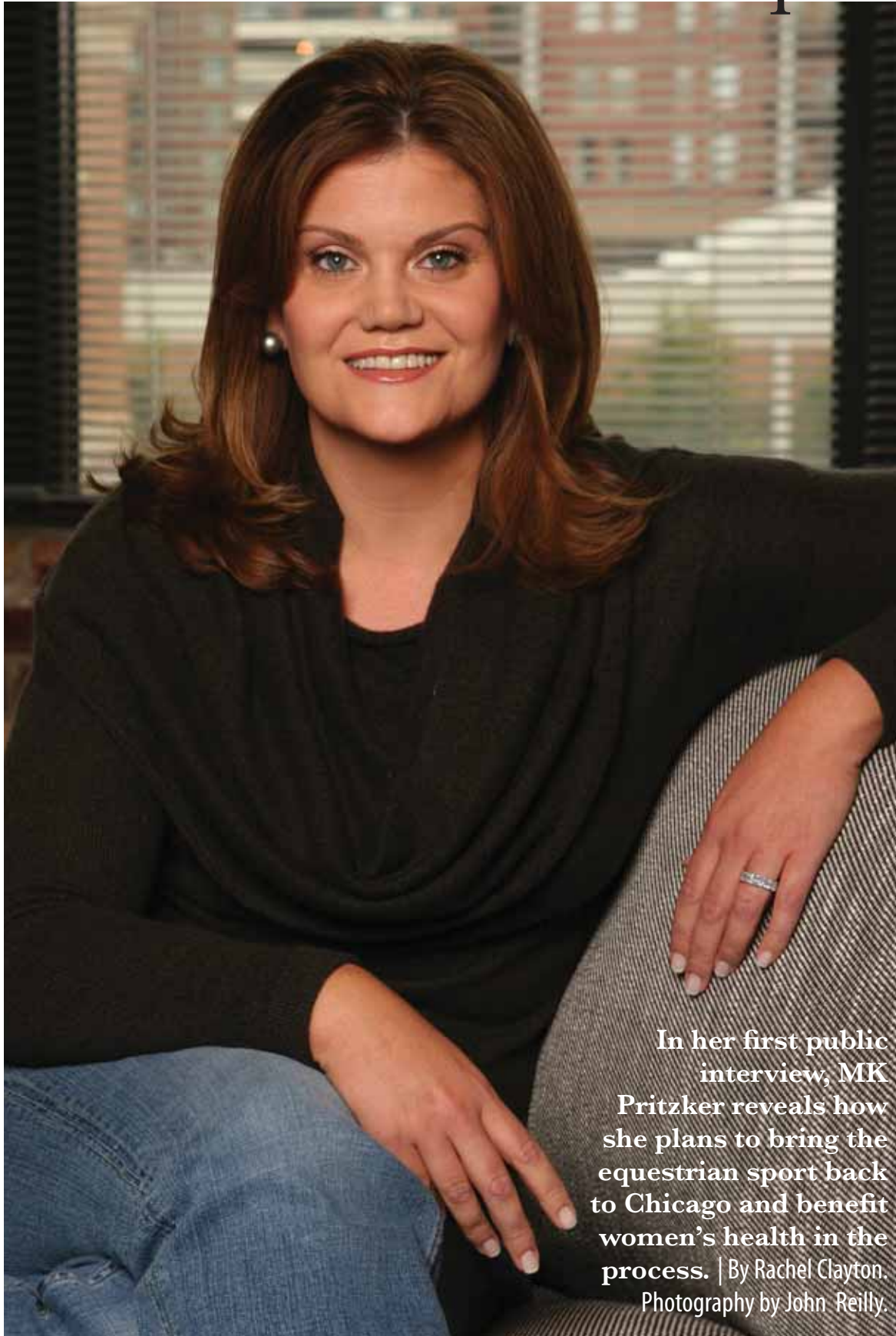


The Consummate Philanthropist



In her first public interview, MK Pritzker reveals how she plans to bring the equestrian sport back to Chicago and benefit women's health in the process. | By Rachel Clayton. Photography by John Reilly.

In his more than 30 years working in philanthropy, Stephen Falk, president of the Northwestern Memorial Foundation, has worked with countless donors and charitable individuals. And yet, of them all, he calls MK (short for Mary Kathryn) Pritzker, 39, “Far and away one of the most philanthropic people I have ever encountered in my career. She’s absolutely amazing.”

Stephen met MK, wife of JB Pritzker and mother of two, nearly half a year ago when she approached him with a unique dual-purpose fundraising idea. A lifelong avid equestrian, MK wanted to host a full-scale, national Equestrian Grand Prix show jumping event to raise funds for the new Prentice Women’s Hospital and in doing so, restore the luster of the equestrian sport to Chicago. Now, months later, MK’s novel proposal is a much-anticipated reality.

The first annual Evergreen Invitational will be held at the Pritzker’s farm (named Evergreen) in Bristol, Wisconsin, on September 15, 2007, just weeks before the new Prentice Women’s Hospital opens its doors. Proceeds—estimated over \$500,000 annually—will directly benefit women’s health programs at the state-of-the-art facility. The majority of the cost of the event will be underwritten by the Pritzker Family Foundation.

“MK is a consummate philanthropist,” Stephen says. “That is defined as somebody who reaches out, touches and makes things possible for people who’ll never know their benefactor. And that’s exactly what she’s doing. The women that she’ll help will never meet MK Pritzker. They’ll never know those who participate in the Evergreen Invitational, or that these programs will be there for them because of all the guests’ and sponsors’ participation and generosity.”

One word that characterizes few people but indisputably defines MK: selfless. The very private Pritzker family is known to shy away from the public spotlight. But MK is stepping into it boldly now, willing to do whatever’s necessary to promote her event and her passion.

Small Town Girl To Big City Woman

Another reason MK has kept herself and her children away from the public eye is because she was raised so far from it. “I grew up in Vermillion, South Dakota, a really small town near the Missouri River,” she says smiling. “It’s about as close to Mayberry as you can get—you can walk from one end of town to the other in about a half hour!”

After high school, MK followed in the footsteps of other members in her family and enrolled at the University of Nebraska. She might have moved back to Vermillion after finishing school like the rest of her family did, had she not gotten an internship in her junior year to work for Senator Tom Daschle in Washington, D.C.

“I basically dropped everything, packed my suitcase and left,” MK recalls. “And I had a great time. I learned a tremendous amount and I also met JB (short for Jay Robert). He worked on the same floor as I did in the Hart Senate office building.” Six months later she was back in Nebraska finishing school while continuing to date JB, now 42, long distance.

“He stayed in Washington for another year before deciding to go to law school,” MK says. “Then he moved back to Chicago to go to Northwestern, we got engaged, I moved to Chicago—and the rest is history. We knew each other for five years and we’ve been married for 13.”

MK credits her deep philanthropic motivation to two men in her life. Her father, who served as the vice president of the University of South Dakota, and was “always involved in every civic activity in the town,” and her husband who she calls, “the most generous person I’ve ever met.”

But she credits her small-town upbringing (she never remembers watching television as a child) for fostering her creativity and instilling in her a deep love of farming, architecture and exploration. Six years ago she and JB purchased the Evergreen Farm, a 45-minute drive from their Evanston residence. They recently expanded it to a total of 150 acres, and MK now spends several days a week there, overseeing the remodeling and renovating. She’s no stranger to getting her hands dirty either.

“We breed horses, we grow hay. I’m involved in every aspect of the farm. I can do any job from driving the tractor to gardening to composting,” MK says proudly. “In working the land day after day, I began to feel this strong motivation to share Evergreen with fellow equestrians and for philanthropy. I wanted to do an event to benefit the city.”

So, that’s what she set out to do.

A “Borrowed” Idea

Up until now, MK says her charity work mostly revolved around the work her husband was doing—most recently raising funds to build the \$30 million Holocaust Museum in Skokie. The couple, not surprisingly, are active in politics and in addition, support numerous charities and gala events. The pivotal moment for MK came a few years ago when she heard about a fundraising Grand Prix in Ohio hosted by Abigail Wexner (wife of Les Wexner, chairman and

CEO of the Limited Brands corporation). Ever since, MK toyed with—scratch that, was *consumed* with—the idea of doing the same thing in Chicago.

“When I heard about Abigail’s fundraiser, I knew it was the perfect venue for what I was feeling absolutely compelled to do,” she says.

So MK shopped her “stolen” idea around, talking to friends and family, trying to get feedback on whether or not such an event would fly in Chicago. The excited unanimous response: It could and it would.

“Everyone said, ‘Oh, this is such a terrific, terrific idea.’ Then, in talking to Joan Brodsky—who’s been a huge influence in my life here—she suggested I speak with Prentice. She arranged the first meeting in her living room over brownies and coffee. And that’s how we started.”

Stephen Falk remembers how things progressed from there. “MK invited several of us to her farm to show us the property and explain how she intended to use it for the Grand Prix. Next, she took us out on golf carts, stood on a berm [a raised plot of land] that she’d constructed, and looked out on the field as she told us this story: ‘The equestrian sport was once very prominent in Chicago but it has since fallen from the landscape. It needs an event that can be a focal point so that people can again be proud of what equestrians are and what equestrians do.’ And she said she had created a venue and an activity that would attract the finest riders, the finest *Olympians*, this country has to offer.

“And then she said to me, but that’s not really the only thing this is about or what it’s about at all. The reason I’m talking to you is because I want to benefit women’s health programming at Prentice Hospital. But I want the programs that are your orphans. They don’t have to have high visibility, they don’t have to have a lot of attention, but they have to have a great deal of impact on women in need.’ And I thanked her for that—because it’s not something you often hear.”

Tradition In The Making

Make no mistake. Like its state-of-the-art beneficiary, the 2007 Evergreen Invitational will be a first-class event of the finest caliber. Richard Jefferies, a seven-time United States Course Designer of the Year will design the jumps and look of the course. David Distler, United States Coordinating Steward General for the FEI (International Equestrian Federation), will officiate at the event. The top-ranked riders here and in Canada will compete. Ferrari and Graff have already signed on as primary sponsors.

Knowing that she couldn’t do it all on her own, MK has put together a formidable team to work on the event: Joan Brodsky; Andrea Murphy, a longtime riding friend who handles publicity; Jen Levine, director of the Pritzker Family Foundation; Tracey Boward, MK’s trusted party planner; Sharon Lear, director of women’s health at the Northwestern Memorial Foundation (NMF); and Sheila Brown, an event consultant NMF brought in for the event. The women convene Monday mornings to plan and brainstorm. “It’s amazing what a group of women can do!” MK says.

Though, looking back, she does admit, “I guess

I’ve really come to realize over the course of this journey that it’s only luck that separates any of us at this table from someone in need. It’s really only luck.”

I was a bit naïve. I had no idea how much work it involved and what a huge undertaking it would be. I really just so wanted to do the event that it didn’t matter. I was going to get the job done.”

Ordinary Challenges, Extraordinary Lessons

The same “just-do-it” philosophy drives MK’s daily life, which is as normal—and completely chaotic—as any working woman’s. “I think my day is probably like all the other Chicago women out there,” she confesses. “I get up early and hopefully have a cup of coffee before my children wake up, then I get them dressed for school, make breakfast and get them out the door. After that, I usually work at my desk and try to get to the farm.”

When people hear the name Pritzker, they assume it’s easier for MK, but the down-to-earth mom says her greatest challenge is the same as any other woman’s too: time management.

“I’m sure it’s like everyone says—my greatest challenge is accomplishing everything I want to in a day,” she says. “It’s very difficult to achieve all your goals, make sure your house is clean, have food on the table, keep your marriage going, make sure your children are happy and do everything else you want to do in whatever time is left over!”

But no matter how stretched for time, MK says making philanthropy a part of her life is a non-negotiable priority. “One thing that I’ve really noticed among people who need help is that they feel a real disconnect from their community. They think that their community doesn’t care about them, but I think that Chicago *really does* care. We’re such a warm, generous city. Everybody should make philanthropy a part of their life, no matter to what degree; whether helping a neighbor or hosting a big event.”

Nonetheless, despite her obvious good fortune, MK knows the only reason she and JB are able to give so much back to their community is that they’re lucky.

“I’ve really come to realize over the course of this journey, that it’s only luck that separates any of us at this table from someone in need. It’s really only luck. I was lucky to be born in Vermillion and not in Dafur. And that’s really what it comes down to. That’s why we all need to show a little more compassion for our neighbors.” Slowing down, MK pauses for a moment. “I hope that came out right.”

Indeed it did. In fact, spoken like a consummate philanthropist. ■

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