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ON OUR COVER

For the first time since Athens 2004, the US dressage team won a spot on an Olympic Games medal podium. From left: Allison Brock, Laura Graves, Kasey Perry-Glass, and Steffen Peters. Story, page 32. Photo by Diana De Rosa.

As CEO of boutique chocolatier Harbor Sweets, amateur rider Phyllis LeBlanc has a yummy job—and still finds time to volunteer with the New England **Dressage Association**

BY KATHERINE WALCOTT

TROPHY ASSORTMENT

TWO OF OUR FAVORITE THINGS: Harbor Sweets president/CEO Phyllis LeBlanc with a bevy of Dark Horse Chocolates gift items

f you need a gift for a horse lover, you pretty much can't go wrong with Dark Horse Chocolates. The high-quality, hand-dipped candies with the equestrian names and designs—like the decadent dark-chocolate, buttercrunch-toffee-filled Dressage Classics—have been satisfying sweet tooths for years. But although you may be well acquainted with Dark Horse Chocolates and its parent company, Harbor Sweets, you may not know that its president and CEO is an accomplished amateur dressage rider and a longtime New England Dressage Association member and volunteer.

Connecticut native Phyllis LeBlanc, 58, is a lifelong horse lover who did Pony Club, evented, and rode hunter seat as a youth. In college at Salem State University in Salem, MA, outside Boston, a friend invited her along to take some riding lessons, and "I ended up, just by chance, at a dressage barn," LeBlanc says.

She was hooked. "I just love dressage. There is a controlled power in dressage that is very exciting." LeBlanc has trained and competed in dressage ever since, studying under instructors including the New England-based pros Keith Angstadt and Cindi Rose Wylie.

Like many college students, LeBlanc juggled classes with part-time work to help pay the bills. In 1978 she took a job working on the production line of the Salem-based chocolatier Harbor Sweets.

"I saw an ad for a chocolate dipper. I thought that looked like fun. So I went and applied, got the job, and what was going to be a part-time job to help fund my college turned into my career."

An Entrepreneur Is Born

LeBlanc's job, studies, and love of horses converged to produce a winning business idea.

Continuing to work at Harbor Sweets after she earned her undergraduate degree, LeBlanc decided to get her MBA. She enrolled at Boston University, taking courses at night. "During that time that I took a class in entrepreneurship, and we had to write a business plan."

At the same time, LeBlanc was doing her Christmas shopping. "I was out looking for gifts for my trainer and my blacksmith and thinking, 'Oh, what can I get them? They're people I care about but I don't know really well. It's hard to buy something that is special but not terribly personal."

An idea was born. "I came up with the concept of the chocolates with the equestrian designs. I wrote my business plan on that for my entrepreneurship class. I probably worked harder on that plan, because it was so exciting to me, than anything else I did in my college career."



ACCOMPLISHED: LeBlanc and her Oldenburg gelding, Chiron

The next step was to get Harbor Sweets' management on board with the concept. As the company name suggests, the products originally had nautical themes befitting Salem's harborside location near the Atlantic coast—and Sweet Sloops, Harbor Lights, and other treats continue to be a mainstay of the business.

As LeBlanc recalls, "It took me about two years to convince the founder of the company, Ben Strohecker, that we should consider launching [the Dark Horse Chocolates line]. We were very much focused on the sea coast and the nautical niche," and Strohecker worried that straying from that niche would dilute the company.

"He finally said, 'Well, let's go ahead and try it.' I worked on it, we launched it, and it paid for all of the development costs the first four weeks that it was on the market."

In 1998, shortly after Dark Horse Chocolates' successful debut, LeBlanc bought the company. She has been president and CEO of Harbor Sweets ever since.

The Gifts That Keep on Giving

In 1973, when Harbor Sweets was founded, "There were not gift chocolates on the market," says LeBlanc. "You'd see Hershey's in the stores and Russell Stover in the drugstores. We came on the scene just about the same time that Godiva came to the US. We were lucky; they paved the way. Now gift food and gourmet food is such a huge market. We were very early into that scene."

Over the years, Harbor Sweets has continued to expand its offerings. As LeBlanc explains, "We do a variety of handmade chocolates in designs that feature different lifestyles. The Dark Horse Chocolates apply to equestrians. We have a line of Perennial Sweets for gardeners, and of course our





DECADENT: Chocolate connoisseurs relish Harbor Sweets' creations, including its signature Sweet Sloops (center)

Harbor Sweets have a coastal theme of shells and boats and things that appeal to people who love the New England coast." Capitalizing on the salted-chocolate craze, Salt & Ayre honors Salem's history in the spice trade, using flavors from all over the world. The company's newest line is called Gather, a nod to the busy bees whose efforts produce the

local wildflower honey that infuses the chocolates.

Harbor Sweets chocolates are for giving, and the company believes in giving, as well, donating 5 percent of its profits to various causes.

"We even donated when we didn't have profits, which was a little tricky," LeBlanc says, "but it's something that has







UNDER ONE ROOF: Visitors to the factory can watch chocolates being made. LeBlanc narrates as workers make chocolates by hand (above right); bonbons are sprinkled with toppings as they roll off the production line (right).



QUAINT: Harbor Sweets' chocolate-factory storefront in historic Salem, MA

been a priority for us, even before the term 'cause marketing' was coined."

The company donates 2.5 percent of sales of Gather chocolates to the Pollinator Partnership, an organization that supports and protects pollinators and their ecosystems. And "we are located in what has historically been the area of Salem where the newest immigrants to the community come. We do a lot with The House of Seven Gables, which has a significant program to help immigrants become integrated into the community." Other supported causes include Boys & Girls Clubs and other local nonprofits. And there are lots of donated chocolates, for use as horse-show volunteer thank-you gifts, as fund-raisers, and other causes as deemed worthy by a Harbor Sweets committee that evaluates donation requests.

"It's a small company. We all do a bit of everything," says LeBlanc, who describes her primary role as "to look toward the direction that the company is going to create new products, new designs." She's also the person you'll meet if you visit the Dark Horse Chocolates booth at the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event in Lexington or Dressage at Devon in Pennsylvania.

LeBlanc says she enjoys going to the shows. "I get great feedback about what people are looking for, and what they like and don't like. And it's fun; I like to meet our customers."

There was one nail-biter of a show, however. The first year that Dark Horse Chocolates exhibited at Rolex Ken-



FULL SERVICE: You'll meet the CEO herself if you visit a Dark Horse Chocolates booth (pictured: at Dressage at Devon)



VIP VOLUNTEER: LeBlanc (center) and fellow volunteers at the NEDA Fall Festival

tucky, there were few sales—until the last day, when "they bought everything I had. I learned that people bought it as a gift to take home to somebody who was watching the dog or watching the horses."

Silver Linings

On her way to her USDF silver medal with her Oldenburg gelding, Chiron, LeBlanc found her goal derailed when the horse sustained an injury that may prove career-ending. She's getting her horse fix in various ways, ranging from driving a pair of spotted draft horses to hacking a retired upper-level combined-driving and dressage horse.

"I've had a some lovely horses I've been offered to half lease," she says, "and that might be something I do, but for right now, it's really kind of a relief to just play a little bit."

The down time might give LeBlanc a bit more time at her home in Bradford, MA, where she lives with her husband of 36 years. But she's far from idle, thanks to her "other job": volunteering with the New England Dressage Association.

LeBlanc got involved with NEDA, the largest single-chapter USDF group-member organization (GMO), about a

decade ago. "I was a sponsor, and there was a problem with my sponsorship. I called them to talk about it, and they said, 'You know, we could really use your help to make sure these kinds of things don't happen. You have the background, the experience.' They pulled me right in.

"So I started out working a little bit with sponsorship with them, and the next thing I know I was heading up sponsorship. I did that for a number of years, and I'm now the vice president of services. I oversee membership, sponsorship, and our marketing and PR."

NEDA, like most GMOs, is mostly volunteer-driven. Says LeBlanc: "I'm in awe of what the organization accomplishes with an all-volunteer board."

With such dedicated volunteers, the accomplishments are impressive but hardly surprising. Let's just say NEDA got one sweet deal the day LeBlanc signed on.

Katherine Walcott is a freelance writer and a lifetime USDF member. Sadly, she lives in the South and was unable to sample the various Harbor Sweets chocolate lines during the writing of this story. She plans to remedy that oversight on her next trip to Boston.