





A *Natural* Fit

SHANNON ARVIN, KEENELAND'S
PRESIDENT-ELECT, HAILS FROM
A FAMILY WITH DEEP TIES
TO THE TRACK AND COMMUNITY

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In the Keeneland archives is a black-and-white photo of a young boy riding his Pinto pony. The boy, no more than 5 and dressed in shorts and cowboy boots, and the pony are both looking toward something out of the frame. The photo was taken at Keeneland, and the moment has remained safely preserved as the boy built a life around the place.



William T. “Buddy” Bishop III grew up at Keeneland and later became its lawyer and a trustee. He inspired his daughter, Shannon, to follow in his footsteps.

William T. “Buddy” Bishop III grew up on the Keeneland grounds, where his father, W.T., served as general manager after being hired as the track’s first employee. The family lived in the third-floor apartment of the clubhouse, where W.T. and his wife, Dottie, remained as their son grew up to become a stalwart in the Thoroughbred legal community and, ultimately, a trustee at the track that helped raise him. Buddy Bishop passed away in 2008, but his lifetime of service to Keeneland and the sterling legacy it garnered will welcome a new chapter on Jan. 1, 2021, as his daughter, Shannon Arvin, becomes the racetrack’s new president.

Arvin’s trajectory, in many ways, mirrors that of her father: law school, a thriving practice at Stoll Keenon Ogden, and now Keeneland, all with esteem from a venerable book of clients and associates. Yet while she grew up hearing the stories and seeing the photos of her father and grandfather alike, Arvin did not enjoy the same unfettered access to the facilities that shaped her dad’s formative years.

“When I was growing up, kids didn’t really go to the races. My mom, she follows the rules, so I don’t have a lot of memories at the races as a child,” said Arvin. “Keeneland has always had a mystique.”

They were, however, allowed to visit her father’s office. Bill Lear, who has been with the law firm since 1980, including 22 years as managing director, remembers watching, or rather *hearing* 5-year-old Shannon and her siblings, Anne and Will, run up and down the

firm’s hallways on Saturday mornings.

“They would just run around,” Lear, who is also a Keeneland trustee, remembered with a chuckle. “You’d be sitting in your office and just look out the door and here comes a little blonde-headed girl and you’d go out and say ‘Whose is that?’ Oh it’s Buddy’s ... That’s my first memory, and then through my relationship with Buddy I followed her along. I knew where she went to high school, college, and then of course UK law school.”

Arvin’s first real exposure to Keeneland came in high school in the form of miscellaneous summer jobs. From working the switchboard, to catalog filing, pedigree research, and even working the message center during the sales, she loved every aspect of the business. Unlike her father, however, Arvin did not spend much time on horseback as a child. Soccer was a staple throughout her early life, but she also displayed a propensity to seek out new challenges. After her good friend Julie Cauthen returned home from a summer National Outdoor Leadership School trip with glowing reviews, Arvin convinced her parents to allow her to do the same. To her mother’s chagrin, she chose Alaska sea kayaking.

“Within her group everyone went around the circle and told how much kayaking experience they had,” recalled her mother, Nancy.

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KEENELAND PHOTO

Buddy Bishop's dedication to his clients and to Keeneland inspired his daughter.



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W.T. Bishop, Buddy's father and Shannon's grandfather, was Keeneland's first general manager.

"When they asked Shannon what her experience was, she said 'I've never been in a kayak.' The trip was rugged. Whatever you were doing, you better do it well because there were going to be consequences. She had to learn quickly."

Arvin's adventurous spirit pulled her away from home for college after graduating from Henry Clay High School. She attended the University of North Carolina, where she gained her first experience as a Keeneland ambassador. It became an annual tradition among her sorority sisters to head west for fall weekends in the Bluegrass. The routine was always the same: Nancy's four-cheese bowtie pasta on Friday night, a day at the track Saturday, and dinner out with the parents that evening. The tradition continued when she moved to Washington, D.C., after college to work for Sen. Mitch McConnell.

Law school was always part of the plan; it was just a question of when ... and then where. After two ful-

filling years in Washington, Arvin almost stayed put in the nation's capital for school, but her heart was in Lexington, and she returned home.

"I loved D.C. so much that I thought about going to law school there, and that could have led me down a whole different path" she said. "I think one of the benefits of going away is that you appreciate how special this community is. That was the truth for me."

Once I was away and would bring people back to visit, I got a better sense of how special this community, and what we have to offer, is. That made me really grateful to come back."

She enrolled in the University of Kentucky College of Law and moved into a house downtown with Cauthen, who was starting a career in the Thoroughbred business. The roots were set for good.

"She was in law school and I was working for EQUIX Biomechanics, and that was just an absolutely magical time in my life," remembered Cauthen, now a member of Keeneland's yearling inspection team. "We were working really, really hard, both of us, but it just was so much fun. That's one of the things that I will say about Shannon that's so unique: She has the ability to work as hard, or harder, than anyone I have ever met, an unrelenting work ethic, and still host a dinner party on Saturday night for 30 people. She's just in-

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credible that way. She can kind of do it all.”

Lear was still at Stoll Keenon Ogden when the “little blonde-headed girl” who once tore through the corridor was hired at the firm upon graduating from law school. Buddy Bishop was a partner at the time and served as counsel to some of the most respected names in the industry and took a hands-off, by-example approach to mentoring his daughter. Lear believes the ability to navigate seamlessly between the social and professional is a defining trait in the legal careers of both father and daughter.

“Buddy was as fiercely loyal to his clients as anybody I think I’ve seen. Buddy’s relationship with his clients became not lawyer but counselor,” said Lear. “For those of us in the profession, being known as a counselor as opposed to a lawyer or a litigator or transaction guy, that is where you want to be. Shannon turned into exactly the same thing, and one of the things that tends to happen is your clients become your friends. So, most of Buddy’s clients, at least that he’d worked with for any particular time, were friends, and I think you would say the same thing about Shannon.”

Through decades of Saturday mornings at the office, dinners, and golf trips, Lear became close with not only Buddy but the entire Bishop family. He notes that while Arvin’s professional prowess lends comparison to her father, the social graces and fortitude draw favorably from her mother.

“The adjective that always comes to mind with Nancy first for me is class,” Lear said. “She is one of the classiest people that I’ve ever met, and Shannon has that. But, if you’ve ever been around Nancy you also know that beneath that gracious, smiling exterior is a very tough lady. You’ve heard the phrase ‘iron hand with a velvet glove.’ That describes both of them.”

And like her mother and her bowtie pasta that was always requested by visiting UNC friends, Arvin has developed a culinary reputation of her own.

“One of the things about Shannon, she’s also a good cook. A really, really good cook,” said Drew Fleming, Breeders’ Cup CEO and a close friend of both Arvin and her husband, Will, also a lawyer and co-owner of Castle & Key Distillery. The Arvins have two daughters, Bishop and McCutchen.



Arvin meets with Geoffrey Russell, Keeneland’s director of sales operations. Her father often sat on the same couch when meeting with sales officials.



Arvin succeeds Bill Thomason, who maintains, “I am confident Keeneland is in good hands.”



During the September yearling sales Arvin made an effort to speak with many consignors and buyers.

“So any time you get an invitation for dinner at the Arvins, you know it’s going to be really good bourbon, great wine, and then excellent food, but the highlight of it is their hospitality and conversation.”

Arvin has built up and maintained an impressive book of devoted clients in the years since joining Stoll Keenon Ogden. She began serving as corporate counsel to Keeneland in 2008, the same year her father passed away, and her work earned her the roles of secretary and advisory member of the Keeneland board of directors in 2015. When Bill Thomason announced his retirement earlier this year, it didn’t take long for Arvin to be tapped as his successor.

“Shannon and I have been colleagues and friends for many years, and given her unique qualifications and knowledge of our core businesses, I am confident Keeneland is in extremely capable hands,” Keeneland President and CEO Bill Thomason said. “Her life and work experiences intertwine with Keeneland’s founding mission — to put the best interest of the horse first. I know that philosophy will guide her leadership of Keeneland for years to come.”

She will officially transition into her roles as president and CEO on Jan. 1 after three months in a president-elect post. Learning and adjustment are required elements of any new job, particularly within the challenging circumstances of a global pandemic, but Arvin



Arvin’s many years representing Keeneland has made her familiar with the sales operation.



Arvin sees opportunity for Keeneland and the industry emerging from the challenges of COVID-19.



Arvin accompanies the connections of Queen Elizabeth II winner Harvey's Lil Goil to the winner's circle during the recent October race meet.

is determined to harness the unique circumstances to keep Keeneland as a vanguard of the industry. She cites a proliferation of online wagering opportunities, innovation in electronic bidding methods during the sales, and embracing alternative work arrangements among the means of pandemic-era progress.

"I do think there are silver linings in any tough situation, so we are looking for those silver linings," she said. "I think that's part of that persistence and perseverance. We can't just pull back and say, 'Oh no, the world looks different.' We've got to figure out how we operate in this new world. That sparks innovation, and I think you've seen a lot of that from Keeneland and I think you will continue to see that from us."

While the effects of the COVID-19 pan-

demical will ripple throughout the industry for years to come, so too will Arvin's ascension to Keeneland's presidency. Almost lost amid her family history, professional credentials, and respect within the industry is the fact that she will be the first woman to hold the position.

"As a woman in the industry, it's huge, to be honest," said Cauthen, whose grandfather Charles Nuckols was a Keeneland trustee prior to Buddy Bishop. "This is a merit-awarded position for a woman at one of the premier racetracks in the world. I think it will be inspiring to younger women in the horse business."

Unlike sea kayaking in Alaska, when it comes to leading an organization through ubiquitous uncertainty, only preparation can bring lasting confidence. It seems Arvin has

prepped nearly her entire life to step into Keeneland's chief post.

"I will say from an emotional standpoint, and I guess that I will always feel this way, the fact that there has been an almost 85-year association, beginning with Buddy's daddy at Keeneland and now with Shannon being president, it almost takes my breath away," said Nancy Bishop. "I mean, it's just so unusual. The thing that makes me feel good is that as she reaches this next opportunity, she's sort of been in training all along to get here."

Lear said it would be easy for somebody to look at it otherwise from the outside and think she was born into the position.

"But that would be a disservice to her because the reality is she absolutely earned it," added Lear. "I think that's important." **KM**



Making the rounds during the September sales, Arvin checks in with stall manager Wayne Mogge.



Arvin will be on hand for the 2020 Breeders' Cup World Championships, the second for Keeneland.

