

RESIDENT FEATURE



By Peggy McGuinness

Mary Ellen & Chris Waugh

and their two daughters and their families, have lived on or near the same piece of property in Atlantic Beach for more than 35 years and wouldn't dream of leaving.

Even after sisters Jen and Cate, years apart, went off to college and pursued careers that put them in the public eye, each was ultimately compelled to return to the beach town where they grew up, deepening their roots and leading successful lives that include plenty of family time with their parents, children, and each other. As Mary Ellen likes to say, her family has always been "better together."

The Waughs married in 1970 after meeting on a blind date in 1968 at a Princeton football game where Chris was playing against Cornell. Mary Ellen, from Bronx, NY, was then a student at St. Vincent's Hospital School of Nursing, and a runner and tennis player. Chris had grown up in the Mandarin area of Jacksonville. After working in urban affairs for a couple of years in New Jersey after college, he and Mary Ellen moved to Jackson-

ville, where Chris eventually started a business with his brother, and later went into business for himself. Mary Ellen had a successful career as an ICU nurse for many years before going into Medical Sales.

The Waughs often rented houses at Jacksonville area beaches in the summers, and after an extended stay at a home on Ocean Blvd and 14th Ave. in Atlantic Beach, they finally decided to move from their condo in Baymeadows to the beach when Jen was about 13 and Cate had not yet been born. Chris credits Mary Ellen with making the decision to move, and says "she made a great call." He has always loved the lifestyle Atlantic Beach offers and is excited about the expanding family's current plans to build in the same location they've enjoyed for so many years. Chris is not a fan of gated communities and very much enjoys the eclectic feel of the neighborhood, as well as its proximity to the beach.

When Chris came back to Florida with his "Bronx Bride," he says with a smile, he first worked for Mayor Hans Tanzler's administration before going into business with his brother Jeff. Mayor Tanzler, some residents may recall, was the mayor of Jacksonville from 1967 through 1979, and was the first mayor to hold office in the new, consolidated Jacksonville after it merged with Duval County.

Chris and Jeff then started their business in vacuum-forming acrylics for plumbing fixtures and ran it for 12 years before selling it. Whenever the Waughs mention this venture, they refer to it simply as "the bathtub business." Chris later started a business working with medical device start-ups; developing strategies to help companies accelerate their growth. A big part of achieving that growth has to do with assisting these companies in "the process of search," Chris explains. He represents them in conducting searches for distribution channels, staff, investors, and partners and alliances. Chris has enjoyed running his business from his home for 20 years, and has no plans to stop anytime soon.

Both daughters attended Episcopal High School in Jacksonville, but the beach was their playground, and surfing, paddle boarding and fishing were all part of life, especially for Cate, who is 15 years younger than her sister. Practically from the time Cate was born, Jen felt much like a "second mother" to her sister, she says, and the two have always been very close. As a teenager, Jen told me, she would sometimes feel self-conscious about strangers who might think Jen really was Cate's mother, so Jen instructed Cate to call her "sister" or "sis" in public. That habit stuck and, to this day, Cate calls Jen "Sis."

Mary Ellen worked at home during Cate's early years, and the two often went to the beach early in the morning before school started. Mary Ellen remembers considering herself very lucky to be able to start every day by enjoying the surf and sand.

Jen, according to her mother, was rather reserved when she was growing up, even as captain of several sports teams. In fact, in her last year of high school she waited until the summer session to take a public speaking course so she wouldn't run into anyone she knew. While attending The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, Jen stunned her parents by announcing she was going to become a Broadcast Journalist, which, as WJXT Channel 4 Jacksonville viewers know, she did. Jen had grown up watching Deborah Gianoulis on Channel 4 for many years and decided that's what she wanted to be. Once the decision was made, she chose the best school in her field at the time, Boston University, and later studied in Paris and Buenos Aires. Mary Ellen recalls with a laugh that Jim Lehr, a former anchor of PBS News Hour, had told Jen at BU that she'd do well "because she had no accent."

Jen began her career as an assignment editor at an ABC affiliate in Jacksonville and then became an evening news anchor in Brunswick, GA while living in Fernandina Beach. She then worked for CNN Española for a while before returning to Jacksonville to work at Channel 4, according to her mother. Entering a large market like Jacksonville so early in her broadcasting career may have seemed an unusual move, Jen told me, but she missed her family, especially her sister, and wanted to be near them. Jen started at Channel 4 first as a general assignment reporter, then as the police beat reporter, and then as a night anchor. Jen is now the anchor of The Morning Show on News4Jax Monday through Friday from 7 am to 9 am, and is also a reporter on their investigative news team, the I-Team. The Emmy award-winning journalist has now been with Channel 4 for 19 years and is married to Chris Griffith, a Senior Project Manager with CSX. The couple spend as much family time as possible with their two children, Chris-John, 13, and Zara, 10, as well as with Mary Ellen and Chris, and sister Cate and her husband, Dustin.

Cate, now an Assistant State Attorney for Jacksonville, was always "the adventurous one" as a child, Mary Ellen says, and her parents did not expect her to return once she left for college. Cate and her father did volunteer work together for Operation New Hope, a prison reentry program, and Cate then worked there from 2009 to 2011. Her eyes were opened to the world of criminal law, then, her mother says, and it was that experience that ultimately led Cate to law school. Not surprisingly, Cate did not come back after college and law school, but moved to Washington DC, then Spain and the Caribbean. But one day, as Mary Ellen puts it, Cate realized she "missed the beach", and she eventually came home to Atlantic Beach and her family here. Last year she married Dustin Middleton, a personal injury attorney with Barnes and Cohen, and the newlyweds live very close to the rest of the family.

The members of the Waugh family are very much a part of each other's daily lives and clearly support each other and enjoy each other's company. It's not unusual to see some of them out walking together or walking Noosa, a beloved 14-year-old Chocolate Lab, or to catch a glimpse of one of them running, scootering, rollerblading, biking or surfing. They even vacation together regularly, and particularly enjoy Exuma in the Bahamas and the Florida Keys, where Mary Ellen proudly caught her first lobster last year.

Mary Ellen, after spending 35 years in the medical field, decided to retire around 2009. She wanted to spend more time with her grandchildren and thought she might also do some volunteer work or find a part-time job, if the right opportunity came along.

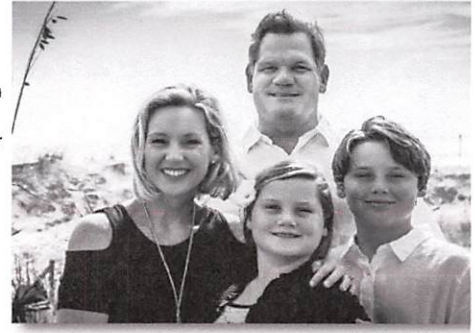
When grandson Chris-John was in 2nd grade at Atlantic Beach Elementary, Mary Ellen would sometimes help there with school activities. When she got involved with her grandson's class project to plant vegetables, she discovered the kids knew very little about the nutritional value of vegetables, nor had most ever tasted freshly picked ones. She also realized that she enjoyed planting vegetables and teaching the children about them. Soon the PTA approached Mary Ellen to capitalize on what she'd been doing and, with grant money through FuelUptoPlay60, launched by the National Dairy Council and NFL and the Jacksonville Jaguars, a national in-school nutrition and physical activity program was introduced at the school. Additional help and materials, such as a picket fence and irrigation design, were donated by groups like the Irrigation Society of the Agricultural Extension Office and the Atlantic Beach Home Depot.

Mary Ellen worked with the school in 2012 to build The Children's Garden by the Sea, which continues to thrive and has been passed on to current students and their parents. In the summer of 2012, a small group had built 4' x 8' boxes for each classroom on the south side of the building, and when school started again, the students began to find fun ways to incorporate the growing and eating of vegetables into their lives. Around the time Mary Ellen started the Children's Garden, Cate had gone to South Africa for a semester to study at the University of Cape Town, where she had helped to start a community garden. When she returned to the beach, Cate and her mother worked together to tear out the landscaping in their Atlantic Beach side yard and built 6 garden boxes for the family. That was the moment Mary Ellen first began to think of herself as a "farmer."

Mary Ellen had also become a volunteer with Beaches Emergency Assistance Ministry (BEAM) and then took a permanent position there. BEAM is a community-based organization serving low income residents. Their mission is to provide emergency assistance and a path to economic stability. BEAM was considering hiring a "garden manager" when Mary Ellen asked them not to and took on the role herself. With a grant for the Jacksonville Beach Home Depot (HD) in 2013 and the help of Kelly Elmore, a gifted landscape architect who had designed the garden at the school, a team of BEAM and HD volunteers built the Grace Garden, which produces 6,500 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetable each season which are sorted in the BEAM Food Bank and distributed to their two food pantries, in Jacksonville Beach and Mayport. Anthony Patrick, then assistant store manager at the Jacksonville Beach HD, was the perfect partner for the project because, Mary Ellen says, "his heart was where BEAM's heart was." Twenty HD employees assisted in pre-cutting and assembling 45 4'x12' garden boxes full of seedlings donated by HD, and a HD Master Gardener also donated her time. At one point, Mary Ellen was told to return whatever BEAM had already purchased at HD, which she did, and then Patrick presented the group with two \$5K gift cards. The garden is thriving and is located at 850 Sixth Ave. S. in Jacksonville Beach.

Mary Ellen is passionate about BEAM and the work they do, and involves family members with the garden as much as possible. Chris often "just watches and marvels," he says, "at what my intelligent and high-energy wife, and the rest of the group, can do." The organization is largely

Continue on page 8





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made up of volunteers; about 456 people at last count, many of whom are also friends and neighbors of the Waughs. Sixty percent of their clients are families with children and one working parent, and another 20% are seniors.

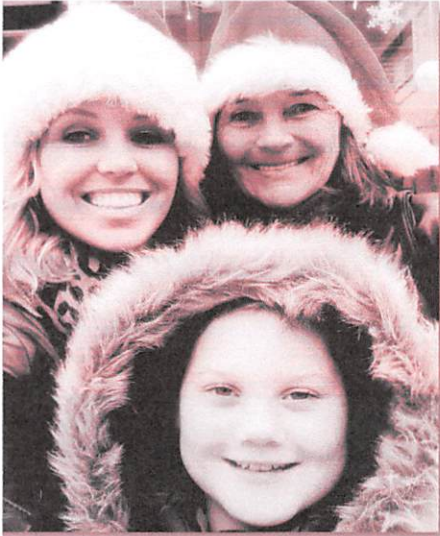
Mary Ellen is immersed in her work and has a deep understanding of the devastating effects of hunger in America, what can be done about it, and what is being done now. In addition to the BEAM garden, for example, there are 38 pick-ups each week from grocery stores and restaurants, where food is moved quickly to those in need. And BEAM has recently added more seasonal items to supplement what they call their "client-choice food pantry," which allows clients to choose the items they'd like. Mary Ellen also participates in the Food Policy Council's focus on childhood obesity and Pathways to Wellness, which focuses on managing disease with food, as well as other aspects of nutritional scarcity and concern. Mary Ellen wants people to know and understand that hunger in America is real and it is everywhere, including Atlantic Beach. It is a national epidemic, and one that is often not discussed, especially in more affluent areas. But as the 2016 "Feeding America Study" pointed out, one in six families depend on a food pantry and one in four children go to sleep hungry.

Mary Ellen and Chris Waugh clearly love and enjoy the family they created and the entire expanded family. Perhaps their greatest gift as parents, Mary Ellen says simply, was giving their daughters a good education. That may be a true statement, but there is likely much more to it than that. Jen shares that she feels very blessed to have parents who gave their children everything they needed to help them thrive, and recalls

that she and Cate were taught that "as long as you give 100% - to whatever it is - you will always be successful."

Having raised their girls at the beach, the Matriarch and Patriarch of the family now enjoy a work-life balance that allows them to help raise their beloved grandchildren here. Zara, 10, is very much into surfing and loves the beach. She has not only been inducted into the National Elementary Honor Society (NEHS), which recognizes students for outstanding academic achievement and demonstrated personal responsibility, but has also been elected its Vice President (VP). The Atlantic Beach Elementary fourth-grader

is clearly proud of this designation, which also comes with the promise of being President next year. Zara and her brother, Chris-John, are both polite, personable kids who are also smart and willing to help others. Chris-John now excels in 8th grade at Episcopal School of Jacksonville, his mother's alma mater, and recently received a perfect score on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Jen Waugh and husband Chris Griffith are not only proud of what their kids have accomplished in their young lives, but proud of who they already are as people. Working hard in school, understanding the significance of family, doing community service and now, farming, are all part of the Waugh legacy.



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