

BOLDMOVES

by Elizabeth Lutyens

In December, 2002, Lea (Eleanor Morse) Sloan became Vice President, Communications, of PBS. Her earliest jobs were chiefly to do with horses—riding and writing about riding—and the distance from paddock to PBS may seem impossibly far. Lea paid little attention to impossibilities, however. Instead of stopping along the way and saying “I can’t do this,” she was, in her words, “exceptionally bold.” Her strategy was to “march in there and give it my everything.”

Lea’s head-on approach to challenges was not, however, a constant in her earlier life. She recalled, “Although my years at Nashoba helped build a lot of self-confidence, and, to a degree, developed my appetite to be competitive, both of those abilities were diminished during my time at Concord Academy.” Lea (who had become “Ellie” while at Nashoba) graduated “in 1969 in a class of 69” among a stellar set of classmates. She had been especially impressed by Lisa Halaby, who would become Queen Noor of Jordan; Emmy- and Oscar-winning film producer Sarah Pillsbury, whose first feature film was *Desperately Seeking Susan*; and Julia Preston, who was Mexico correspondent for *The New York Times*, part of the team that won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for international reporting, and co-author of the just-published *Opening Mexico: The Making of a Democracy*.

“It was an illustrious group,” Lea said. “Although I was successful at C.A., I was well back in line from the front-runners in my class. I wasn’t in the stratosphere. I don’t think that kind of fiercely competitive environment helped me. While at Concord Academy, Lea had been embracing competition in one area: horseback riding. She was as passionate about the sport as she was knowledgeable, and she noted its inadequate coverage in *The Boston Globe*. She said, “My grandparents knew Tom Winship [legendary *Globe* editor-in-chief for two

decades], and they created an introduction for me. At this point in my life—I was sixteen years old, had no confidence—I marched into Tom Winship’s office and offered my opinion about the way the *Globe* covered horse sports. I told him the paper had no credibility with any of its readers who knew anything about horses, and he said, ‘I’m going to send you down to talk to the sports editor.’” The upshot: the sports



Lea Sloan '65

editor gave this very young and inexperienced writer the horse sports column assignment, a job Lea continued off and on for the next ten years. Reflecting on this coup, she said, “Compared to my C.A. classmates, I didn’t think I was competent, but with things that I thought needed to be done, I was very bold.”

From Concord Academy, Lea went to Connecticut College, and although she said it was a good choice for her, she added, “I wasn’t fully engaged in the college experience. I didn’t know what I wanted to do.” In

the fall of 1972, after she had finished college in three-and-a-half years by taking accelerated course work, she married Jon Kaiser. She and Jon bought a 200-acre farm in Pepperell, from which they ran a commercial hay business and raised dairy heifers. In 1975, the Kaisers’ daughter, Whitney, was born, and in addition to farm work, Lea returned to the drawing and painting she’d started under the “amazing tutelage” of her mother, Sue Morse, at Nashoba. She began doing artwork on commission: portraits of clients’ children, houses, and animals. (Lea would later return to painting, after taking her current job at PBS in Washington. She said, “Painting is a great way to switch gears and recharge my batteries. As a result of all that good early training, it is not only enjoyable for me but I am having some success with it.”)

The farm menagerie included horses, and Lea continued riding competitively. She said, “I managed to qualify for the 1980 Olympics equestrian team, and although I didn’t make the final cut, I trained with them while I was long-listed. This was another confidence builder. A goal I’d set long before, when I was at Nashoba, was to make the Olympics, and I was happy to have met an aspect of that goal. In fact, the Olympics that year, in Moscow, was boycotted by the U.S. equestrian team (among others), and, as Lea said, “It would have been tragic to have made the team and then not be able to go.”

Lea described this as “a turning point in my life.” She made the decision to end her marriage and move into Boston, where she resumed work for the *Globe*, writing under the byline of Ellie Kaiser. Her subject matter expanded to include a column on animals (“pets inside the house and wildlife encounters outside”) and turned the horse column into a broader one on “recreational sports—the kind that anyone could do.” The sports column was, to say the least, hands-on: “I’d

go do them and write about them. Ocean kayaking, glider and small plane flying, hot air ballooning, skiing, scuba diving." One of the less-known sports Lea came across was ice time trials with the Porsche Club of North America, for which a track is plowed through a snow-covered, frozen lake to create a super-slick raceway for vehicles. Lea explained, "You get in a car and drive as fast as you can, trying not skid through a snow bank." Did Lea worry about her safety when it was her turn behind the wheel? "You don't go as fast you'd think," she said.

While writing for the *Globe*, Lea took a second job as promotion manager for *Boston Magazine* and then "branched out" into the wider media world. "I heard about a company in Kenmore Square, Century III Productions, which did work such as TV commercials, corporate image films, and radio spots. I walked in there and talked them into the fact that they needed a PR person." Although Lea knew nothing about production, she quickly rose up through the ranks. "And then," she said, "on one bright and sunny day my future husband, a TV commercial director recruited from New York, walked in the door. It was love at first sight for both of us."

Lea and John Sloan, who were married in June 1989, started their own production company in Boston and then moved to Los Angeles when he began a fellowship at the American Film Institute. Lea took a job there at a PR firm, Shaw/Spelling Associates, and did work for production companies and television shows such as "Tales from the Crypt." In 1992, she persuaded an L.A.-based entertainment PR firm (Bender, Goldman & Helper) to let her open their Miami Beach office. "They said, 'Sure but you need to make it profitable within three months.' I did. After two years, when they wanted to sell, I got two partners to help me buy them out." She became executive vice president/partner at the new company (Gordon Sloan Diaz-Balart). One of its clients was Paxon Communications, which recruited Lea to be part of the small team that launched a new network, PAX TV, in 1997. As their senior vice president of marketing and public relations, Lea worked at PAX (now ION Television) until 2002, when an executive headhunter called to talk with her about the position of Vice President of Communications at PBS. She got the job, and she and John moved from Florida to Washington, D.C. where he continues in



Lea Sloan '65 on the White House lawn

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the production field, focusing on corporate image projects.

In this new position, Lea's charge is to lead the strategic development and management of communications with the press, member stations, public officials, and other key stakeholders. She oversees the staff of a long list of PBS departments: Corporate Communications, Program Publicity and Special Events, Education and Online Communications. Her department's work runs the gamut from promoting major primetime series and specials such as Ken Burns' "The War" (the new Ken Burns documentary on World War II) to children's programs. PBS participates in or hosts special events that help promote their shows, including the White House Easter Egg Roll, the Washington DC Bookfest and numerous receptions for Congress. She also promotes interactive services targeted to educators. "We have companion Web sites that live on PBS," she said. "For example, if you're a teacher and go to pbs.org, you'll find resources to help you plan how to use

'The War' in your classroom. You would find materials correlated to your state standards." Another strand of Lea's job is corporate communications. "We promote our executives for interviews and work with the government relations department to manage messaging to Capitol Hill. Everyone who wants to know about PBS comes to us."

Sometimes what people want to know requires more than a simple answer. Crisis management is also Lea's responsibility. She said, "One of the interesting things about this job is that people in this country, whether members of Congress or individual citizens, have a sense of ownership of public television. They get much more excited about what's on PBS than on other channels, and it's important to listen and call the right shot. We can't do everything each person wants us to do, however, because people think opposite things. Conservatives think we're too liberal, and liberals think we're too conservative. Our CEO [Paula Kerger] says, 'I guess we must be getting something right.'"

The recent controversy over "The War" is an example of this dichotomy. Lea said, "Ken Burns went to four ordinary towns, put ads in local papers, and said, 'Come talk to us.' No Latino people did. Still, Ken regretted that he hadn't included Latino stories, and we entirely supported his decision to add the appropriate footage. No one program, however, can tell every story. Right now I have a letter in my e-mail from an organization of Puerto Rican veterans of the Korean War concerning a film we've accepted about the 65th Regiment. [This was the all-Hispanic regiment nicknamed "The Borinqueneers," after one of the original Indian tribes that inhabited Puerto Rico.] The veterans think the producer doesn't tell the story the way it should be told, and we are going to welcome their proposal to tell their own story. Latino leaders have always been supporters of PBS because of our very good track record of diverse programming, notably in children's programming. The biggest challenge is that PBS wants to be so much to so many. What is important is that we sort through ideas and options and do what we think is right."

Another challenge is, according to Lea, "the reality of the media landscape. It's plain old frightening for anybody. There are 400 more channels now because of the proliferation of cable. That's the universe we're in. Although PBS doesn't consider

Alumni news

ratings in its programming decision, we know that ours are well above 95 percent of all cable channels. We far outrank Discovery, Bravo, the Learning Channel, even CNN, and although we fall below the broadcast networks, our ratings erosion is far less than theirs. In the early 90s, a lot of the cable networks took a page from the PBS book, but have since abandoned that direction. A&E isn't what it started out to be. Bravo has given up arts programming. At first we had a lot of competition from programs such as 'Sponge Bob,' but people began to ask themselves 'Why are my kids so rude?' Our new 'Curious George' went on the air last fall, and it is now rated number one. Our kids' programming is re-emerging from the plethora of children's shows as the ones that parents value most."

Lea added, "We distribute over 2000 hours of programming a year, a huge amount. Is every show perfect? No. But is it really good programming? Yes. We win when teachers vote PBS as *the source* of the most valuable video *for* their classrooms. We win when the poll we've done for the last four years shows that Americans rate us as the most trusted institution in this country. We tie with the military for citizens' estimations of the best use of their tax dollars. We always outrank other networks in numbers of awards, but we aren't always represented accordingly in the press. They sometimes leave PBS off the radar, but we're getting back there. I'm working hard to do that."

All of it sounds hard, but Lea has never dodged difficulty. "This is the best job I've ever had," she said. "If I had known exactly how demanding it would be when I was sitting in front of the CEO and interviewing for it, I wouldn't have thought that I could do it. But I discovered that I can. Fire hones the sword. I feel very fortunate to have been able to meet the challenges that have risen in front of me."

Lea Sloan belongs to an extended Nashoba Brooks family. Her mother, Suzanne Morse, was the first long-time Nashoba Country Day art teacher; her father (now deceased), Thomas R. Morse, served as a board president of The Brooks School; her sister, Barbara (Bunny)'67, served as a Nashoba Brooks Parents' Association president; her brother Toby (Thomas R. Morse III), is a Brooks School graduate ('65); and her niece, Hilary, is a graduate of Nashoba Brooks ('02).

1965

Deborah Moses Tonissi writes from Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, that she is in her twenty-sixth year managing personal funds for Eaton and Vance. Her husband Peter continues to teach and her sons attend local day schools: Ellis (13) is at Noble and Greenough and Parker (9) is at Dexter.

1967

Temple Bruner Staples is busy with her own business, "First and Lasting Impressions, Makeup Artistry by Temple." She also volunteers for the American Cancer Society's "Look Good, Feel Better" program. She and her husband Jody and daughter Alexandra (18) live in Framingham, Massachusetts. They all enjoy bicycling, hiking, and Martha's Vineyard summers. Temple tells us that her memories of Nashoba Country Day School include Mrs. Elefante's eighth grade, playing field hockey, and art class. She remembers "...great times, especially with **Canta Hackman** and **Jenny Wylie**, and commuting everyday with **Phoebe Porter**. And going to **Melanie Brown's** home and

bouncing on the backyard trampoline."

Barbara Old Walker is very active with The Marie Strain International Peace Foundation. Barbara and her husband live in Concord.

1970

Marion "Quita" Atchley Schillhammer writes, "I am about to start my eleventh year at Calico Corners. My daughter, Molly Merrick, has graduated from Lake Forest College and is about to start graduate school at Boston College to earn her master's in social work. My son, Dan Merrick, graduated from Kimball Union Academy and is a freshman at Trinity College in Hartford."

1972

Kim Gordon Marks works in customer service for Kohl's in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. She and Richard have two children, Michelle (12) and Eric (15). She has great memories of Nashoba, including "going to the operetta *Iolanthe*. What a blast! I loved the white elephant sales, playing field hockey, and the dances we would have with Fenn School."



Temple Bruner Staples '67 visited the school this spring. She is shown here with Amy Capofreddi, Director of the Annual Fund and Alumnae/i Relations.