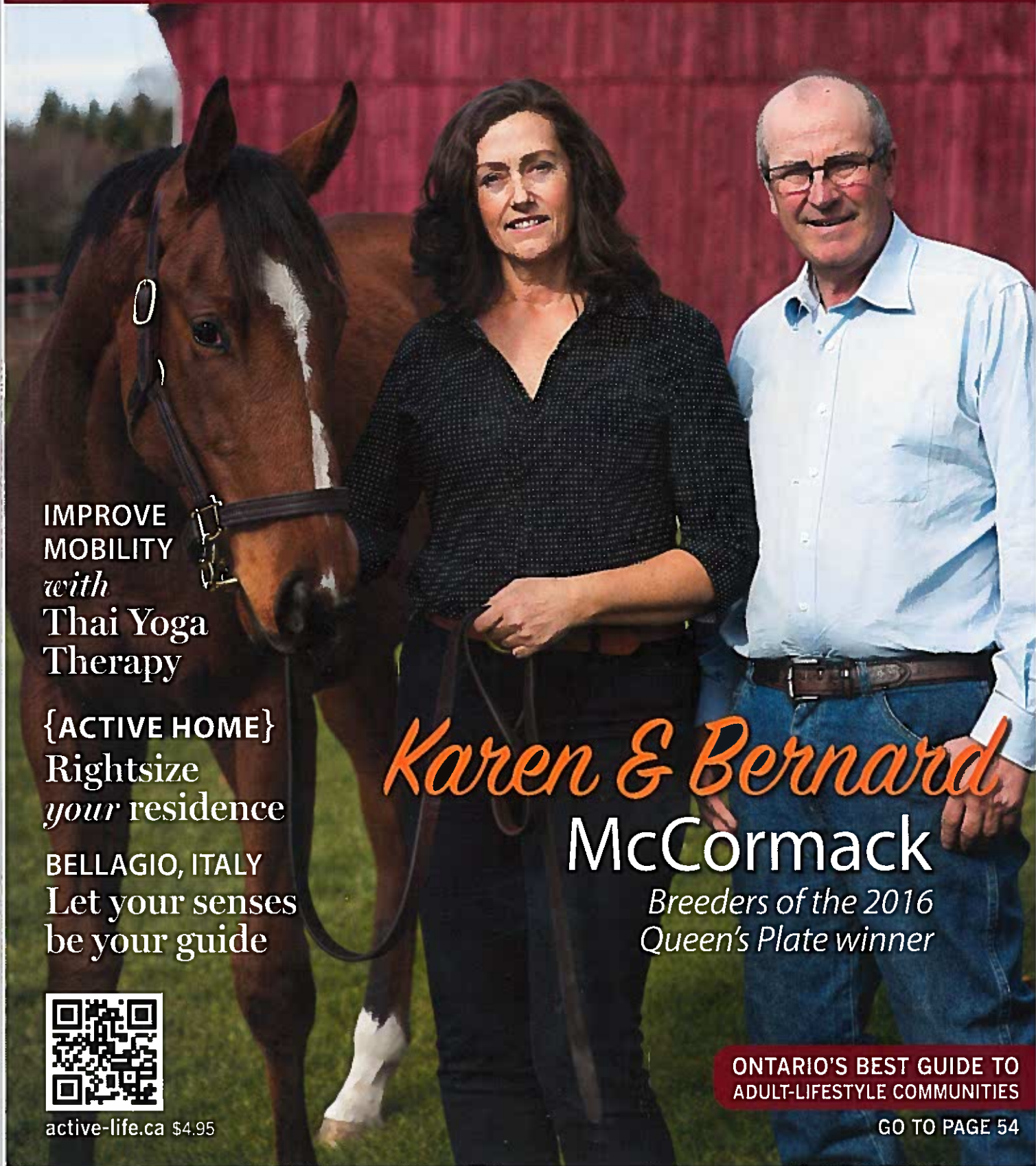


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Karen & Bernard McCormack

BY CECE M. SCOTT

CANADIAN THOROUGHBRED BREEDERS REALIZE THEIR DREAM

Bernard and Karen McCormack, both 58, are the breeders of Sir Dudley Digges who was the winner of the 2016 Queen's Plate – the oldest, continuously run stakes race in North America. "Last year actualized one of those goals that you very much want to attain in horse racing – winning the Queen's Plate," says Bernard.

Bernard, who immigrated from Ireland in 1981, comes from three generations of horse people. His grandfather raced and bred horses in Ireland, choosing the orange and black racing silks. The McCormack colours date back to 1923, and the couple still use them today for their business. "My dad raced in those colours," says Bernard. "The logo, three horses, is an old Celtic insignia – the circle of life."

A love of horses was instilled in Bernard by his father, who was a racing journalist for the Associated Press, and for the Irish Independent. By the time Bernard turned 18, he owned his first car and his first brood mare.

Karen says she was born horse mad. Her parents, Irish immigrants as well, moved to a farm in Caledon from Brampton when she was 12 years old. Three months later, she received the gift of lifetime – a small chestnut mare. "She gave me insight into horse behaviour that I was not able to learn in riding lessons," says Karen.

The couple met in 1985. Bernard had immigrated to Canada four years earlier and was working as an assistant to the General Manager of E.P. Taylor's Windfields Farm in Oshawa. Karen had joined the Equine Insurance

Photo: Jake Martell



Group, and continues to work for them on a part-time basis to this day. Married in 1987, their daughter Clare was born in 1988 and their son, Connor, two years later. "We were one of 20 families that lived and worked at Windfields Farm," says Karen. "A bit like Camelot – a magical place to raise our children."

In 2004, Karen and Bernard purchased their own farm just outside of Port Perry, Ontario where they could raise and breed their own horses. "The year we turned 45, instead of slowing down," says Karen. "We bought Mapleshade Farm."

Rose, a Clydesdale mare, was sought out to be a wet nurse for this orphaned filly. They quickly became inseparable.



When Windfields closed in 2008, the McCormack's decided to focus on their own business in earnest – Cara Bloodstock. Cara is the Gaelic word for friend, and in this vein they represent their clients at equine auctions.

While walking their property, the couple came upon a weathered headstone engraved with the name, Eliza Jane Shaw, 1849, five years and one month old. The discovery had a profound effect on both of them. One of the farm's paddocks is called Eliza Jane, and this past year a new filly was named in her honour.

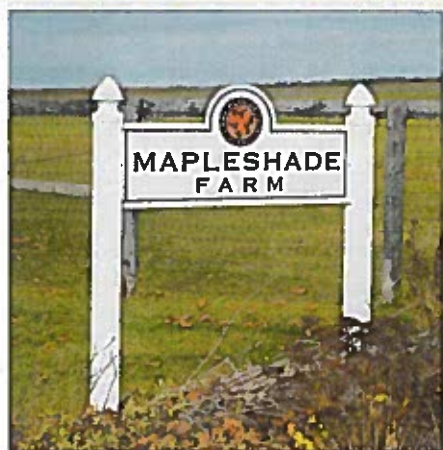
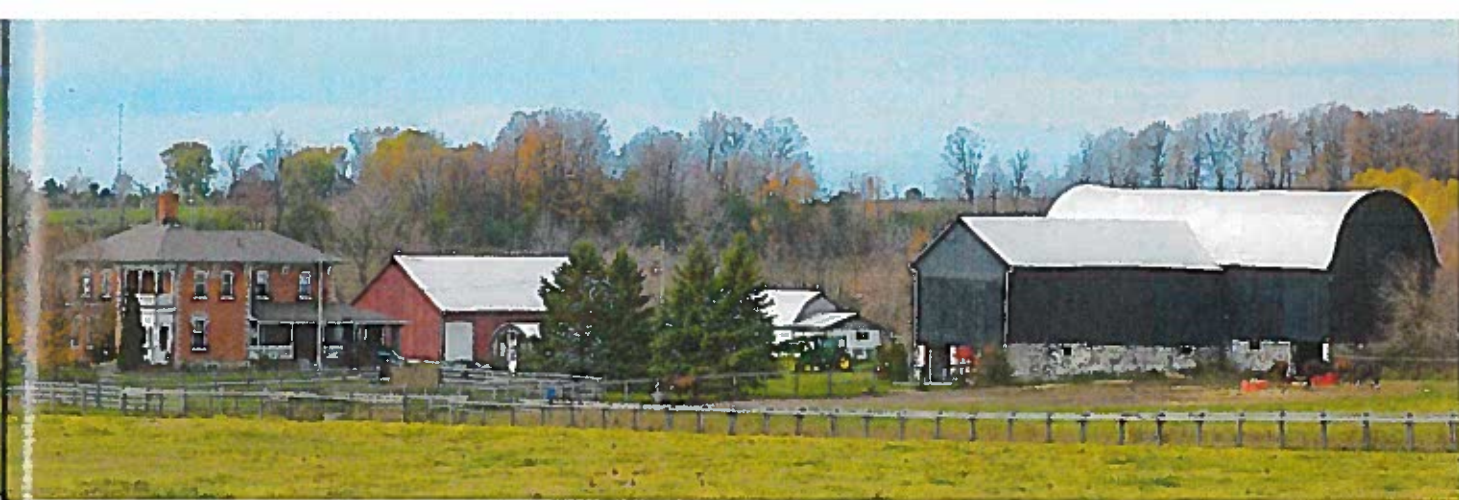
The McCormack's consider each, and every, horse a part of their family – especially Karen. "We love to watch the mares and foals milling around on a summer evening. We do Walt Disney voice-overs about the conversations we imagine the horses are having with each other," says Karen with a laugh. "The horses have definite personalities."

"It is an ongoing spiritual and emotional conversation – we are integrated with them in that way," adds Bernard

As they approach their 60's, the McCormack's have adapted their operation with the inclusion of such things as a hay elevator. With ever-changing technology, they can now monitor the mares on cameras to see where they are at in the foaling process, and to keep an eye on them after the birth – which is a crucial few days. Nine mares are expecting in 2017. "To horse people, weekends don't mean what they mean to other people," says Bernard.

Bernard is often away at sales for extended periods of time, which means that Karen carries the full workload. "I do feel a sense of accomplishment that we are still here and still doing all of this, although the physicality has changed for me," says Karen. "I have become more aware of the requirement for strength."

Last year they lost a mare after foaling, and Karen had to find a nurse mare (like a wet nurse) for the orphaned filly. Rose, a Clydesdale mare, was ready to wean her own colt. Rose lived with them for the summer and raised their thoroughbred filly as



her own. "There were lots of tears and love invested in that partnership," says Karen.

"Sometimes I sit on the GO train on my way to Bay and King," says Karen. "And I wonder if there is anyone else on the train who was up foaling a mare overnight, or bandaging a leg before leaving home."

Both Karen and Bernard continue to ride, and they made sure that both their children could ride. They've owned race horses on and off since the year 2000, and sell their foals at auctions in Lexington and Toronto. "It's always a thrill to see one of our babies racing in the silks of their new owners," says Karen.

Currently Karen and Bernard have part ownership in three race horses, including Eliza Jane who's the filly in the cover photo.

"I have enjoyed every decade and every stage," says Karen. "We are fortunate in that our experience, and our life path, has led us to this place where we can work, live and play – all connected to horses. And, we are fortunate that we have our health, which is a huge thing. I used to say that I was looking for a retirement exit strategy while Bernard was still trying to breed the Queen's Plate winner. I don't know what I can say now that that goal has been accomplished."

"The Queen's Plate runs every year," says Bernard. "Maybe we'll have to add an 's' to the word plate." ■

"The horses have definite personalities – a flick of an ear, the shake of a head – we can tell by their outline which horse it is, even in the dark."

Karen McCormack



Sir Dudley Digges wins the Queen's Plate in 2016.

Photography: JoAnn McHardy
Photography (top and Mapleshade sign): Jake Martella;
(bottom right): Woodbine Entertainment Group/Michael Burns Photography