

Equines and Easements

Leah Palmer designs high-end homes for humans, horses and dogs; Atoka Farm goes under easement; and famed early television star Arthur Godfrey's estate goes on the market.

BY RICKY ADDA

Like many 20-year-old equine-obsessed young girls, Leah Palmer moved to Middleburg from New Jersey in 1993 to pursue a life of riding, grooming and training horses. This occasionally included smoking stiffs, but that never quenched her equine's ambition and obsession.

"I did what I set out to do," says Palmer, now 47. "I rode and sold horses that went on to the Hall of Fame. I rode everything. I did it myself." By age 30, she decided to go to college, earning a degree in architecture and planning with lessons from Catholic University in 2005.

Since leaving school, Palmer has completed 50 different projects involving structures for horses, dogs and humans. At any time, she has between five and nine works in progress in various stages of development. She handles everything including barns, manurems, renovations, additions, pond placements and magnificent new kennels for the Piedmont Fox Hound.

Sitting on the kitchen counter in an extraordinary Victorian house she's remodeling off the Atoka Road for Middleburg owners Joe and Stephanie Spytak, Palmer says she has never advertised. "It's all been word of mouth. I'm too busy for a website. I don't have a landing page."

Her clients include long-time Middleburg resident Pippy McCaerwick, who has a circa-1800 Federal brick and stone home off Route 90 that had "several questionable additions" and needed restoration. For singer-songwriter Mary Chapin Carpenter, she consulted on a major renovation and re-building. And, for weekenders Lisa Jacobs and Paul Brinkman, Palmer reworked a portion of their older home, which had two front doors and no hall.

"I'm a puzzle person," Palmer says. "I'd



Showing off, the former Leontine Eberly home of the late TV host and horseman Arthur Godfrey, it is on the market for \$14.5 million.

rather figure out how to move a driveway and add a small addition and raise the roof than build a whole house."

Just up the Atoka Road from the Spytak property, Wendy and Mike Smith have placed a 350-acre tract known as Atoka Farm into conservation easement through the Land Trust of Virginia.

The sprawling area once owned by steel heir Hubert H. Phipps was later bought by former Virginia Senator John Warner, IG, where he married actress Elizabeth Taylor in December, 1976. Jack Kent Cooke, the late Washington Redskins owner, was a neighbor.

Smith, originally from Winchester and the president of the Opperville Horse Show, paid \$7.7 million for Atoka in 2016.

"As a very young man, I fell in love with the countryside in and around Middleburg," he says. "Once I started riding horses, my dream of owning a horse farm came true as years ago when I bought 'Peggy's Grange' (across the street) and moved in with my wife."

The Smiths hope to protect Atoka's "view, history and natural resources of plants and animals." The tax incentives for setting aside, dividing and building more on the farm are lucrative. Smith adds that it's comforting to

know the area will never be over-developed.

And speaking of large estates — the late skulele-playing, down-home broadcast personality Arthur Godfrey (1903-1983), who got his start in Washington, bought Breton Hill Farm near Leesburg in 1946. He added additional acreage through the years and lived on then 2,000-acre spread for \$6 million in 1977. Princess Yoko Ono Akihiko, a half brother of the late King Paul of Saudi Arabia, purchased the estate from Godfrey for \$5.1 million in 1979.

Now occupying 37 acres, the two-bedroom mansion has been owned by the sisters for 30 years. There are tenant and guest houses and a ten-car garage (plus stables [where Godfrey's Palomino, Goldie, once resided; remember?]). Middleburg-based agents Cindy Palk and Brandy Grossman of TTD, Sotheby's International Realty of Mid-son have it listed for \$2.49 million.

A final note: Godfrey is buried in Leesburg's circa-1855 Union Cemetery and his granddaughter, Mary Schmidt Amundson, was a 2010 television personality on "The Real Housewives of Washington, D.C." **WJ**



Leah Palmer has recently finished on sleek, sleek IG Auditing real things program at Middleburg.