

# WESTERN DRESSAGE ASSOCIATION

## OF AMERICA

### In Memory of Ellen DiBella



Dear Friends,

I am sad to announce the passing of a legend. We have lost our darling founder and past president, Ellen DiBella. Ellen passed away the evening of August 20, 2023. To honor her, I am sharing the words I wrote in 2019 to nominate her for the USEF Lifetime Achievement award that Ellen earned only a couple of years ago:

#### How an Eagle Taught Me to Fly

I am a horse show judge.

I learned the existence of Western Dressage at Colorbreed Council in 2014 when I was there for judges' education. The discipline was new and needed judges so I started learning about it: researching, scribing at shows, apprentice judging.

As I was doing this, interest was growing in my community and a group of us decided to host a Train the Trainers™ clinic. A couple of us attended the WDAA Annual Meeting and learned so much our heads were spinning like a figure skater in a Tilt-A-Whirl... And that was the beginning. From there, I went on to start a State affiliate, become a Western Dressage judge, conduct Western Dressage Clinics, and I was asked to join the WDAA Board of Directors as chairman of the Rules Committee. Previous to all that, I had experience managing small shows and I had been the President of a local saddle club, but I had no experience managing any type of equestrian organizations on a National level. I was a fledgling...

Ellen DiBella, however, was the sitting and founding President of WDAA. She had served as a director for both USEF and the Morgan Horse Association. She was an eagle! Ellen's eagle eyes had seen a new World that she was working to create where Western riders had a systematic training method to help them develop a relationship, honoring the horse and a competition system for which Western riders could perfect their skills just as English Dressage riders did. Not only did Ellen have this dream, but she was making it come true and sharing it with the World free, by making WDAA an educational, not for profit organization. Through Ellen's leadership, Western Dressage blasted its way into the forefront of equestrian sports in America!

Jump ahead to 2016: Ellen DiBella, the eagle was looking into the future again. She was in her seventies thinking about technology and considering methods for growing Western Dressage past her lifetime. Ellen

saw things in me that I couldn't see in myself. She knew I could help WDAA as its next President. She asked me to consider it. I was wary because I could barely support myself and my family working three jobs. I didn't have the time or means or connections to support such a young and growing national organization. I felt unprepared and not ready to lay my neck on the line. Ellen saw I was like a bird on a ledge, looking down, not sure if I could leave the safety of the ledge to take on a monumental project and risk failure on a big stage. Ellen didn't push me off the ledge. She flew over to it and stepped off with me when I became President of WDAA. She flew with me and reminded me to keep flapping my wings. Once I found my confidence and learned to succeed and grow WDAA with the members, volunteers, and staff, Ellen moved away from me slowly and watched me lead. She allowed me to take the reins of the precious organization she pioneered as a gift to benefit Western horses and riders everywhere. I can't imagine what courage and faith it must take to hand your life's work to another person in a volatile World and trust they will cherish it and work for it the way that you did...

Ellen has devoted her life to service for equestrian sports and honoring the horse, but she hasn't done it alone because she has inspired more little birds than just me. She encourages any rider and any horse whose rider is willing to accept the gift of Western Dressage. It is a discipline and a training method that embodies this quote from Tom Roberts, "If you are fond of a horse and wish to do him a real favour – train him well. Teach him good manners, good habits, both in the stable and under the saddle. You need never worry about the future of such a horse if for any reason you may have to part with him. You assure him of friends wherever he goes. Perhaps the greatest kindness you can do any horse is to educate him well."

Perhaps the greatest kindness one woman can do for equestrian sports is to create an organization to share a kind and effective training system with the World so that every horse can benefit from the greatest kindness and be educated well, to be assured of friends wherever he goes, to be spared neglect, or cruelty, or a shortened life... Ellen has spent her lifetime working for every horse to be valued and cherished, for all of us to reach our highest potential...

Ellen remained a WDAA Director Emeritus and worked on special projects. Ellen started a special WDAA membership program for military veterans and a WDAA program for special needs riders.

This year, WDAA accomplished more of Ellen's vision and some of mine. Western Dressage is thriving in an era of video games and social media when other equestrian disciplines are struggling. We expanded the WDAA World Championship Show to five days and World Show entries increased by 30%. WDAA hired its first, full-time executive director and implemented a free video education portal for members, on its website. Western Dressage led the way for other USEF disciplines hosting the most USEF Lite shows.

Oh, she disguises herself as a sweet little grandmother, a mama bear, or a cunning fox, but don't be fooled. Ellen Dibella is an eagle. She soars over the rest of us and drops in when we need words of wisdom or encouragement. She makes us better people so horses have better lives.

Ellen's volunteer service on US Equestrian committees from 2005 to 2020 is remarkable, the following is a list of committees on which she served.

Board of Directors  
Awards Committee  
Breeders' Committee  
Legislative Committee  
Morgan Horse Committee  
Western Dressage Committee

Additionally, Ellen has served on the board of directors of the American Morgan Horse Association and the board of trustees for the American Morgan Horse Institute. Ellen showed Morgan horses in Western Pleasure for 38 years earning multiple World and Reserve World Championships, before discovering Western

Dressage. She has worked on show committees at all levels including every year for the Western Dressage Association of America World Championship Show and seven years for the Morgan Grand National and World Championship Show. Ellen served on the board of the Colorado Horse Park. She helped found the Rocky Mountain Cancer Center Foundation which provides financial assistance to cancer patients and their families in meeting living expenses while fighting cancer.

TRAINING/EDUCATION: Ellen is a graduate of the University of California – Santa Barbara where she earned a degree in Sociology with a subspecialty in medical social work. During her time there, Ellen was a National Merit Scholar and the only freshman on the UCSB debate team.

With a broken heart,  
Cindy Butler, Your President  
Western Dressage Association of America  
From Dini Swanson – WDAA Executive Director

I am heartbroken over the loss of Ellen, but she would not want any of us to dwell on it. Ellen was all about the future; she spoke openly about wanting WDAA to grow even faster and stronger without her. It was not about her, it (WDAA and Western Dressage) has always been about the horse and only the horse.



Ellen saw something in me that I didn't see, I was in the right place at the right time, and she grabbed me up and put me to work. I started volunteering in 2014 and she mentored me all the way to becoming WDAA's first Executive Director. I owe everything to her. Her foresight and wisdom have guided every decision made to direct WDAA on its successful path. Ellen always had the best interest of the horse in mind and could pick apart a challenging issue until we could build a solid foundation from its parts and make an issue and asset. Her intelligence was astounding, she was involved in so many different facets of the equine world, you couldn't go anywhere with her and make a quick getaway, everyone knew her! And they all had great Ellen stories! Ellen was and is an inspiration to me and countless others. I will miss her so much; she was more than a mentor and dear friend, she was family.

We will have a celebration of Ellen's life at the 2023 WDAA Western Dressage World Championship Show, bring your best Ellen memories and wear your best bling, we will celebrate her and her beloved Western Dressage and WDAA till we shake the rafters in heaven!

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## A Few of our Fondest Memories of Ellen DiBella





May her light continue to shine in our hearts, as we remember and honor the legacy she has left behind.

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