

THE CP Interview Joanie Holzer Schirm

By Debbie Goetz

For years I heard the name Joanie Schirm around College Park. While our paths never crossed, I knew she was a woman making a difference in our community and in Orlando. As she welcomed me into her home on Lake Concord for this interview, I quickly felt like I was visiting an old friend. What a gift it was to meet this inspirational woman who went from being a receptionist at an engineering firm to owning one of her own, to spearheading the effort to bring World Cup Soccer to Orlando and, most recently, to uncovering family secrets that took her on a journey all over the globe, changing her life.

What brought you to College Park?

My husband, Roger Neiswender, and I knew we wanted to live on water. We were living in Casselberry and were initially looking in Maitland on canals. In 1992 my girlfriend, who was in real estate, saw this house listed by Anne Rogers. It had been reduced so she thought it might work. We ended up buying it and renting the house across the street for 18 months as we tore down the house and built this one. My son Derick was in elementary school at the time. He went to Princeton and then to Lee and Edgewater. He was the first quarterback to take EHS to win the state championship.

When you moved to College Park you were in the engineering business. How did you end up owning your own firm?

I'm not an engineer, but in my early twenties my then husband and I moved to Atlanta so he could finish school at Georgia Tech. One day I walked across the street into an engineering firm and applied for a job. They hired me, first as the receptionist, and then made me the branch secretary. They were growing so fast, they made me branch administrator. Frankly, they were throwing everything at me. I learned all about the business of engineering. After about four years, two senior guys opened another office and I went with them to run it. After doing a market study, I was able to convince them to open an office in Orlando in 1982. Westinghouse ended up buying that company. In 1991 I started my own company, Geotechnical and Environmental Consultants, Inc., known as GEC.

That was during the time you were in the middle of trying to get World Cup Soccer to Orlando. How did you find yourself spearheading that colossal challenge?

When I moved to Orlando I was looking for a way to get involved in volunteering with anything to do with sports. I read in the newspaper that Tom Dorman, then Orange County Commissioner, was looking to form a committee to organize sports in the city. Because of my engineering background, I ended up on the committee working on renovating the Citrus Bowl, adding seats in particular.

In the meantime, the US had put together a bid to be a participant in World Cup Soccer in 1994. On July

Fourth 1988 it was announced we were awarded the games. There were 18 stadiums that were possible to host matches, including the City of Orlando. But the stadium was run-down and didn't have the international field dimensions. Most people on my committee weren't soccer people and didn't see it for what it was. A lot of people had a negative response. What seemed to be in my mind a no-brainer, there was all of this "we don't want to do this." I couldn't get people to help me at first. Tom Kemp, from Los Angeles, was traveling all over the country with a pitch on why it was such a great opportunity for cities to host World Cup. After being told I would never get 100 people to attend Tom's meeting, we ended up having to turn people away. That was my first [realization] like "wait a minute, this is something the community is going to rally around." Now people believed in it.

In 1992 it was announced that we got it. There were 24 cities who put in bids, and there were nine of us who got selected. This ragtag group of volunteers gave of our time and we did it! We worked on it for six years.

I think because my father was European, and soccer is so big there, I always believed in it.

Speaking of your father, you have just published a book about letters you found after your parents' deaths, "Adventurers Against Their Will."



My parents died two days apart in January of 2000. When my siblings and I were going through their belongings, we decided to start with the Chinese boxes that were always placed high out of our reach when we were growing up. We found about 50 letters in the first box, and then found more in the second. We found even more in other places around the house. There were 400 letters in all, written to and from my Czech father during World War II.

My brother and sister agreed that I could have the letters. One of the other things I chose to keep was this desk that my dad made when I was born. My mom would pay bills here, and it was also where she kept games. But I remembered it had other stuff in it as well. When I went to check, back in the back with piles of papers was a letter written to my father by his father three days before he and his wife were taken to



Joanie Schirm at her home on Lake Concord

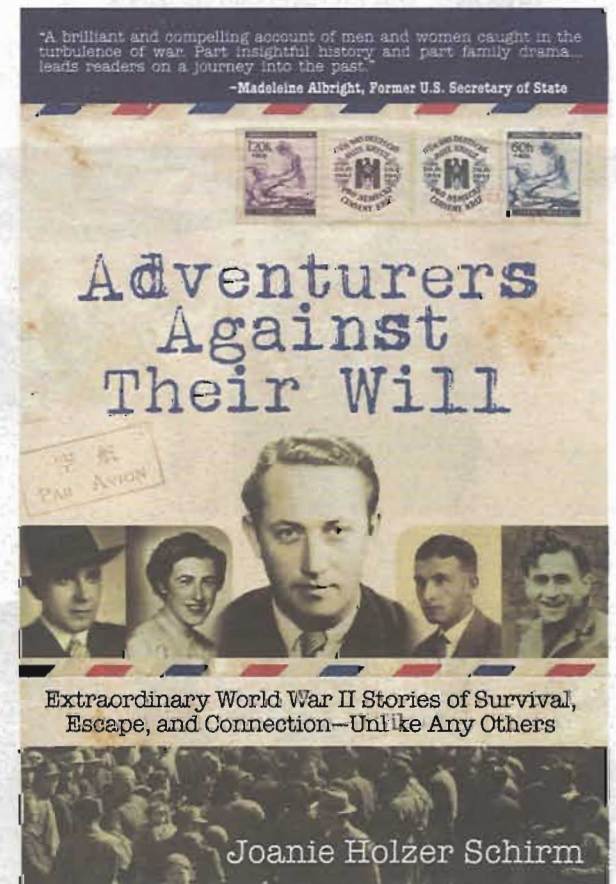
a death camp, believed to be Sobibor. I believe my dad would look at that every once in a while. That was the first letter I had translated.

My father escaped Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939 and ultimately ended up in China. Among the letters were several that my father had written to his parents trying to get them to join him. They didn't want to be a burden on anyone.

The letters are all from my father and to my father, written by his close friends and family. They are filled with hope, grief, drama, betrayal, and surprisingly, even humor. They share the cruelty of the Holocaust — and yet joy as well — as they go on with life in the midst of the horror all around them.

Seeing the original handwritten letter by Joanie's grandfather overwhelmed me; it brought tears to my eyes. As Arnost Holzer knew his fate when he wrote it, this was a goodbye letter to his son, Valdik. Valdik's father also instructed him to take care of his mother, Olga, never imagining she would be killed as well.

Joanie presented me with a copy of her book, and it was, as I imagined it would be, a page-turner that will stay with me forever.



Visit joanieschirm.com to view the book trailer and to learn more about this incredible story. You can purchase your own copy of "Adventurers Against Their Will" through Joanie's site and also at barnesandnoble.com or amazon.com.