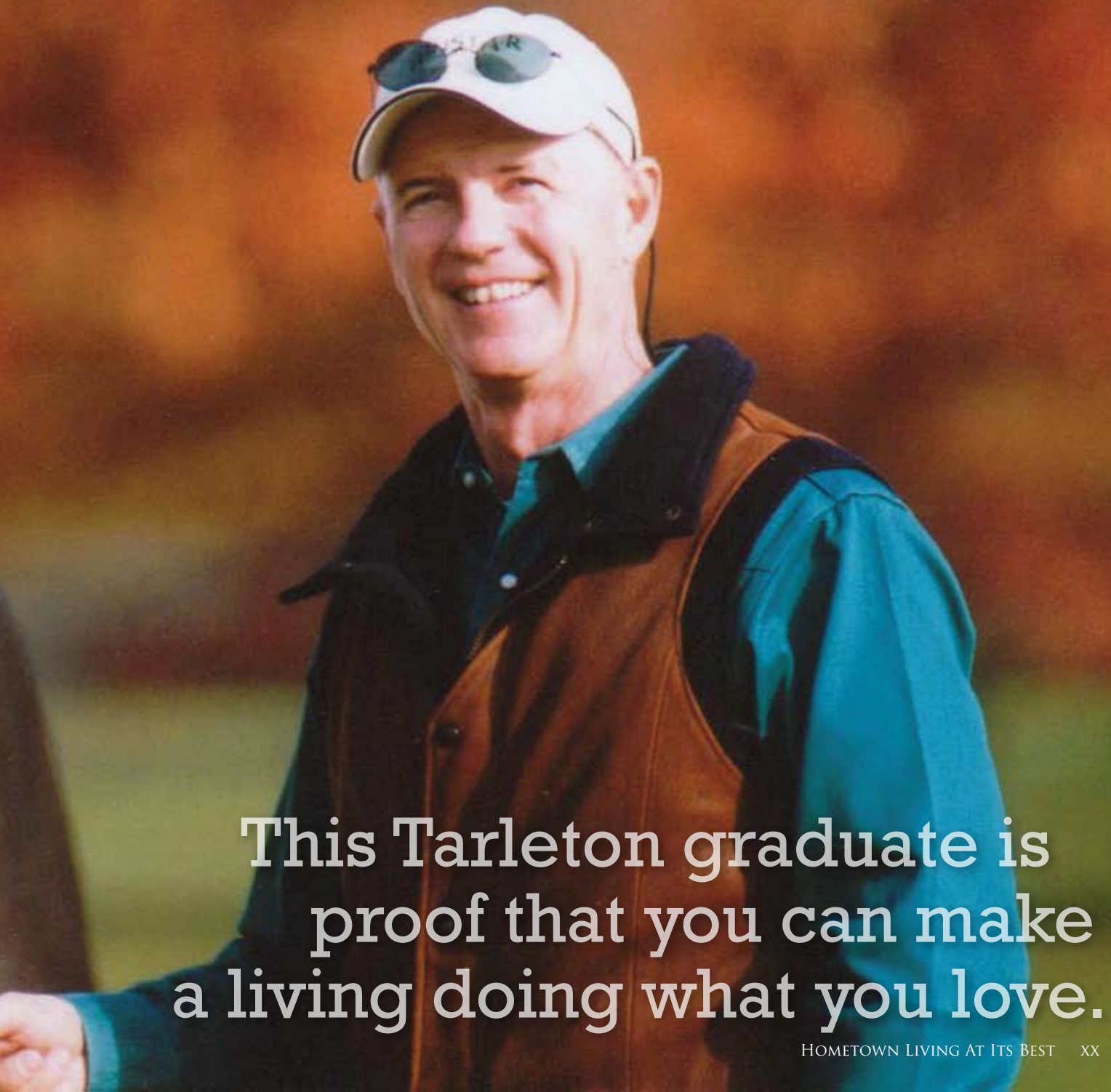




BILL CASNER

BY PHIL RIDDLE



This Tarleton graduate is proof that you can make a living doing what you love.

Bill Castner grew up in El Paso, Texas where his love of horses developed at an early age. Bill's first job was galloping horses in Sunland Park when he was 15; this was the beginning of his love for racing. All of the jobs he has had since have all just been stepping stones to get him back to the racetrack. He's trained horses, owned businesses outside of racing, even became wealthy as an entrepreneur; but his love for horses has always pulled him back to the oval.



ABOVE Bill and his wife, Susan. They have been "happily married" for 35 years. The pair met at a racetrack where Casner worked as a trainer and Susan worked at the betting window. They met in May and they were married in September.

Casner began working as a young teen out of necessity. His mother, a school teacher, struggled to take care of an ailing husband and meet the family's financial obligations. She passed along a sense of responsibility to young Casner, who took whatever jobs he could find to pay his way through college. She also passed on to him a love of education. He entered Tarleton State University in the fall of 1968 with plans to major in biology and become an equine veterinarian.

"I went my first semester at school out at the University of Texas- El Paso," Casner said. "A good friend of mine, Richard Crockett lived in San Saba. We had talked about going to school there together and we ended up doing it." Casner did not shrink from hard labor, taking odd jobs during the school year to scratch out spending money, but always returning to Chicago for his summer job at Arlington Park Racetrack.

"I put myself through college working at the racetrack," he said. "I'd gallop horses in the morning and get a job in the grandstand in the afternoon. I worked as a security guard one year, I bused tables one year, I worked in the parking lot, I had a variety of jobs." Sometimes Bill was even found sleeping in the tack room to make what little money he had go a little further. Finally, in 1972 he reached his goal, graduating with a degree in biology. Taking his degree he went back to the racetrack where he became a trainer. "Really, my true love was the racetrack," Casner readily admitted. "When I graduated I went back to the racetrack with the intention of becoming a trainer, which I did. I ended up training for about six years."

Just two years removed from Stephenville and Tarleton, training race horses led Casner to meet two people who would have a continuing influence on his life. First, he met his wife, Susan; they have been married for 35 years. "Happily married for 35 years," he corrected. Not surprisingly, the pair met

Through the Years...

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at a racetrack where Casner worked as a trainer and Susan worked at the betting window. They met in May, and after a summer of trekking through Europe on \$5 a day, they were married in September. That same year Casner met Kenny Troutt, who was to become the second most important person in his life...his business partner.

But, pardon the pun; racing was not “stable” enough for Casner, who now had two young daughters to support. “I left the racetrack when I was 31 years old,” he said wistfully. “I had two daughters to raise and that life was a bit nomadic. I really wanted to get somewhere I could have some stability for my family.” In 1979 he headed back to Texas, always with an eye for opportunities to get back into thoroughbred racing. He purchased a Snap-On Tool dealership in Waco and about a year

later, Troutt sold his business and followed the Casners to the Lone Star State.

“Kenny and I met when we were both 25 years old in Omaha, Nebraska,” Casner remembers. “He had a small construction company and he got some horses and I trained for him. That’s where we developed our friendship and our business relationship. When I left the racetrack and moved to Texas, we started trying to see if we could find a business opportunity to help us create something significant.”

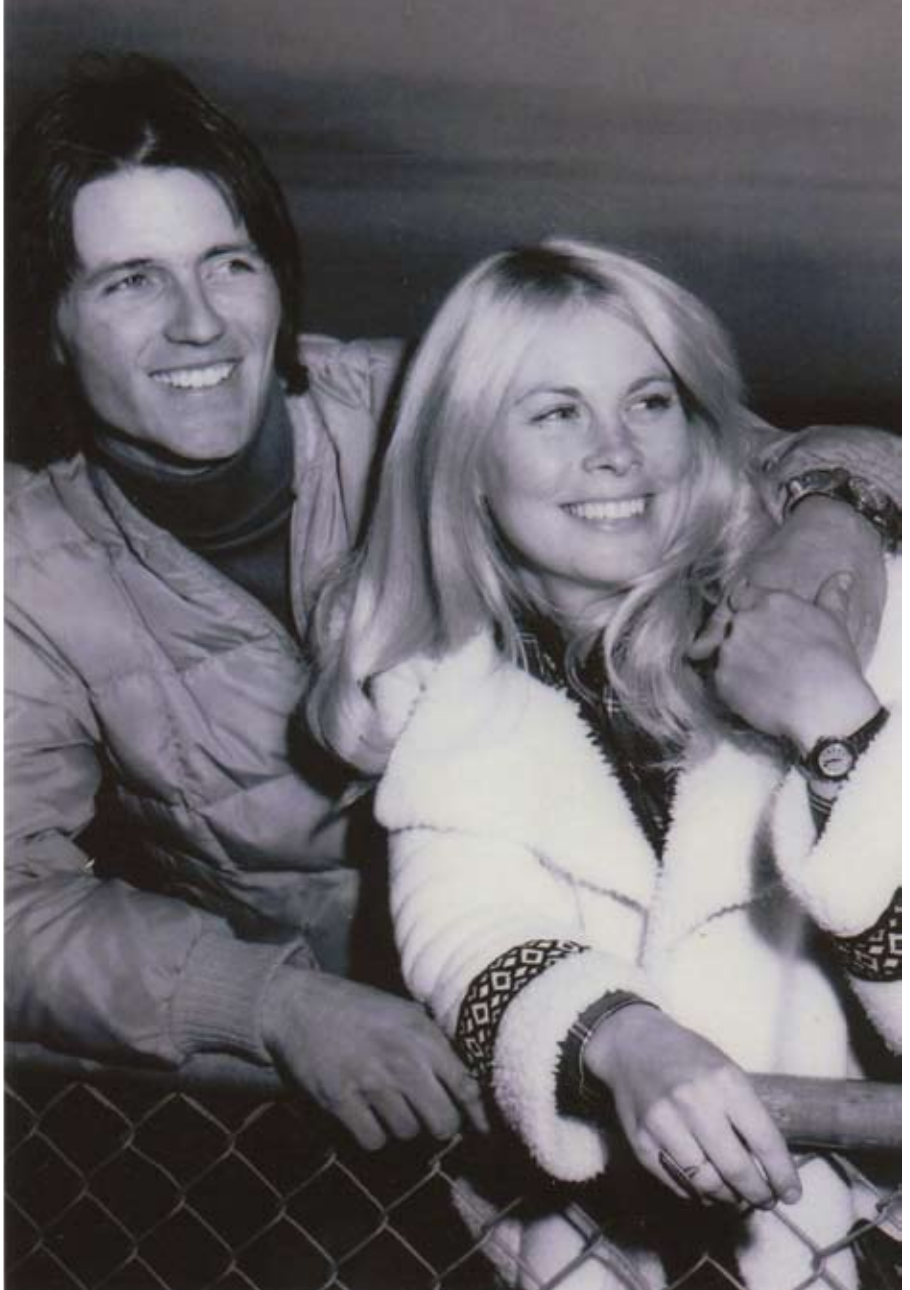
That opportunity came during a 1987 conversation between the friends in which the skeleton of a billion-dollar company was formed. Troutt and Casner became partners in Excel Communications, a multi-level marketing company that sold telecommunication products, including long distance telephone service. Nine years later the company went public, reportedly creating more millionaires than any company in history except for Microsoft. Excel, worth \$5 billion at the time of the initial stock offering, was the youngest company to ever be traded on the New York Stock Exchange. “We started Excel in 1988,” Casner said. “We took it public in 1996. We were very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time with the right business plan. It was right after telecommunications and long distance had been deregulated and opened up. We were able to ride that moment in time.”

And ride it he did, right back to his first love horse racing...in 1998 Casner and Troutt sold the company for \$3.5 billion wasting little time getting back into the horse racing business. In 2000, the pair bought Prestonwood Farm in Versailles, Kentucky and renamed it WinStar. They have about 65 horses



RIGHT Bill and Susan Casner with President George W. Bush. Bill says after taking Excel public in 1996, “We were very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time with the right business plan. It was right after telecommunications and long distance had been deregulated and opened up. We were able to ride that moment in time.”

RIGHT Bill and his wife, Susan in 1975. **BELOW** The Casner family in 1982. **BOTTOM** 1980 when Bill became a Snap-On Tools dealer.





TOP The Troutt and Casner families at the Kentucky Derby. **ABOVE** The Churchill Downs races. **BOTTOM** Bill participating in an ARHFA team roping event. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Bill and his family on vacation.

in training there, along with two of the top studs in the industry, Tiznow and Distorted Humor.

It was the latter that put WinStar Farms on the thoroughbred-racing map, siring Funny Cide, the 2003 Kentucky Derby winner. “Funny Cide was the horse that really launched WinStar Farms,” Casner beamed. “He was in the first crop of Distorted Humor and really launched Distorted Humor as a sire and gave us the opportunity to grow.” In 2010, Run for the Roses featured another WinStar-bred winner. “Super Saver is home-bred. We raised him,” he said. “He was the first time we went to the winner’s circle as owners.”

In spite of all his success, Casner has not been immune to heartache. His 23-year-old daughter was killed in a 2002 terrorist bombing while visiting Bali. Kerri was vacationing alone in Indonesia when a car bomb ripped through a row of discotheques where she was found. “She lived so much more than most people ever live in a lifetime and gave so much to so many people,” Bill Casner told a Vail, Colorado newspaper following the attack. “She left so many people

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[Bill Casner]



with so much. She made us all better, and that's her number one legacy."

Though now a gentleman farmer in a business where millions of dollars can ride on a single foal, Casner still has a deep, abiding love for the animals he raises. "I think most people in the business truly revere the horse," Casner said. "The horse is one of God's greatest gifts to us, a phenomenal animal. It never ceases to amaze me how willing a horse is to do whatever we ask of him." "Then, of course," he added, "there are those individual horses that become very, very special to you."

Casner still spends as much time as possible in the saddle. He splits time between his Texas ranch and WinStar Farms in the Bluegrass State. "I love both places," he said. "When I'm in Texas I'm on the back of a horse and I'm roping. When I'm in Kentucky I'm heavily involved in the business of WinStar." "I've got 165 acres in Flower Mound, Texas and about 30 horses on my place there," Casner said. "I team rope as well, that's another passion of mine. I love to get on a horse and I love to compete."

Casner is quick to point to the importance of his Tarleton experiences in his success. "The education I received at Tarleton was top notch," he said. "They had very high-quality professors, the curriculum was very, very good. I've continued to have an interest in science all my life. Of course, that was inspired by and fueled at Tarleton." He said his TSU education comes in handy daily as he strives to breed better, faster horses and stronger bloodlines. "I've continued to use science as an integral part of the WinStar program," Casner said. "We're always looking for new and innovative, novel ways that come out of science that we can use to move our program forward. One of the keys to the success of WinStar is that we're always looking for a better way. We have a saying, 'If you're doing the same thing tomorrow you're doing today, you're not moving forward.' Certainly the education I got at Tarleton gave me the foundation to understand science and its significance."

Breeding a pair of Kentucky Derby winners has also gained Casner recognition among his racing

peers. He has served as chairman of the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association and he is the co-founder and chairman of the Kentucky Equine Education Project. In addition, Casner received the Thoroughbred Charities of America Leadership Award in 2007, the 2005 W.T. Young Humanitarian Award and the 2003 Thoroughbred Breeders and Breeders Association Industry Service Award. He is also a founding member of the National Scholarship Foundation providing educational opportunities to children of behind-the-scenes racetrack workers.

That's an impressive resume, to be sure, but he says there is more to come. "We're going to continue to grow and try to produce some of the best horses in the world," he said. "We feel like we've only started. I'd love to win the Kentucky Derby numerous times. The cornerstone of our business plan is developing stallions. We're always trying to develop world-class stallions that will further the breed." † **ECL**

