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*the inside story with*  
**debi chard**

*The 30-Year Anchor of Live 5 News Invites Us  
to the Lowcountry Plantation She Calls Home*

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# Inside Story

Personal & professional perspectives of beloved  
Lowcountry news anchor Debi Chard

*by* JULIE SPRANKLES • *photography by* MICHAEL COSTA



*In 2003, July 15 was proclaimed Debi Chard Day in the City of Charleston due to the Live 5 anchor's "dedicated service to the welfare of her fellow citizens." One half of the longest running news teams in Charleston, Debi has been a familiar face in Lowcountry homes for over three decades. Breaking the news that affects Holy City citizens, she has crossed the threshold from stranger to friend—a voice we trust to keep us informed. But, although she often feels like an extension of the family, most of us wonder what the petite media powerhouse is like when the cameras aren't rolling. In a charming reversal of roles, Debi welcomes us into her Huger house on historic Longwood Plantation to share the inside scoop on the people who have impacted her, the stories that have stuck with her, and the city she loves to call home.*



***You graduated from the University of Iowa with a double major in Journalism and Speech & Dramatic Arts. When growing up, did you dream of pursuing a career in broadcast journalism?***

Not really...I think mostly in high school I excelled in writing and English. I grew up in a very small town and a lot of my friends went on after college into fields like marketing or journalism, so it seems like my high school did very well in those disciplines. Although I think that if I took a test today to determine what career skills I'd be best suited at, it would probably be something in the science field, which would surprise a lot of people.

***Did your first job in broadcasting live up to your expectations?***

I worked at a radio station in college for course credits and I covered county council meetings, which was interesting. I didn't necessarily have expectations because there weren't really women in television, and television news was just developing. When I moved to South Carolina, I got a job

at a radio station in Columbia in news and probably made every mistake there was to make! It was just me and one other guy, and we simply jumped in and learned—which was probably the best way to do it. Radio at the time was much more immediate than television was, as television was "film at 11pm," so I learned skills in radio that would benefit me down the road in live television.

***Over the past 30 years, you have become a bit of a Lowcountry icon. You are often referred to as "the face of Channel Five," and famous Southern novelist Pat Conroy even referenced you in his latest bestseller South of Broad. You have clearly won over the hearts of the Holy City! When did you get your first big break in the Charleston market?***

I thank John Rivers, who owned the television station at the time, for hiring me. I was hired as the radio news director for WCSC radio so, after moving from radio in Columbia to radio in Charleston, I very quickly started working on Saturdays in television news. I would work in radio dur-

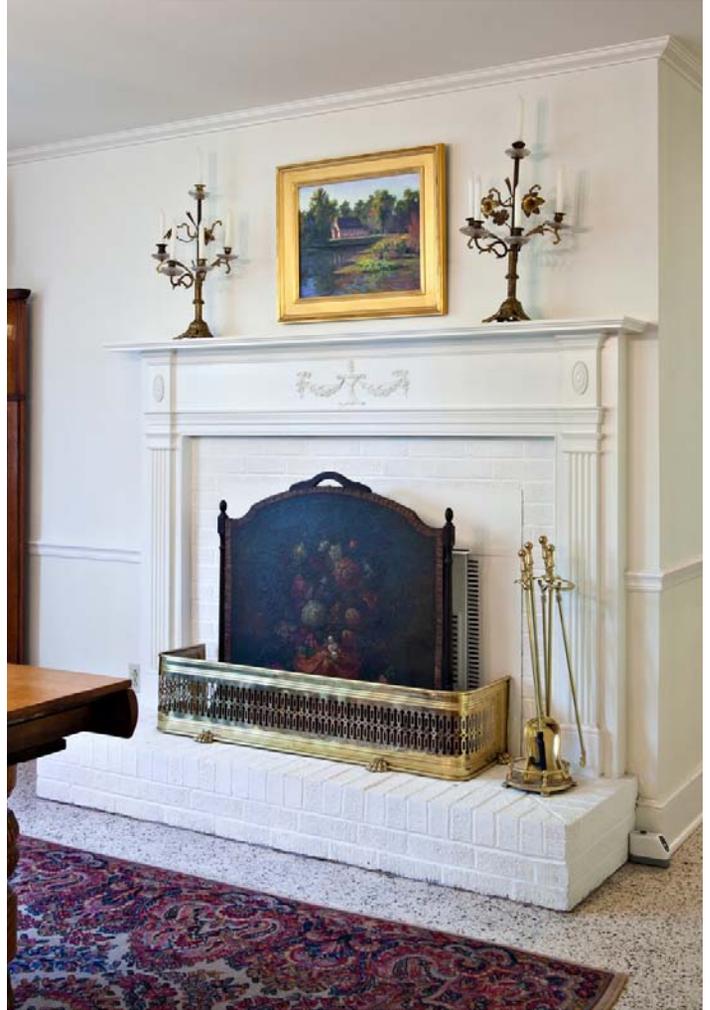
ing the week and in television on Saturday, and I did both for a long time before moving full time into television. I worked six days a week for quite awhile!

***As anchor and managing editor seen weeknights on WCSC-TV Live 5 News, you are paired with Bill Sharpe—the two of you are actually the longest running news team in Charleston. How has working with Bill impacted your career?***

Bill is great; we're like brother and sister! We bounce things off each other all the time. We talk about ethics; we talk about writing stories; we talk about issues. I respect him tremendously. We have a great working relationship, and I think it's really rare that we have a shop where so many people have been there for so long. Bill Walsh has been there for 15 years, Harve Jacobs has been there for a very long time, and a lot of people we work with behind the scenes have been there a long time. I also do three newscasts with Raphael James, whom I think the world of. When I write a special assignment, I always want Raph to

*["On Longwood Plantation] I can truly unwind and relax. My cell phone doesn't even work out here!"*





(left) The table and chairs, chandelier, and antique wall mirror (not pictured) all came from the home on the Battery in downtown Charleston in which Rabbit grew up. (right) A gift from Rabbit to Debi, the painting over the dining room mantle depicts the Pompon Hill Chapel, which is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

read it over before it is edited. We truly are all a family, and I don't think you can fake that kind of chemistry on air.

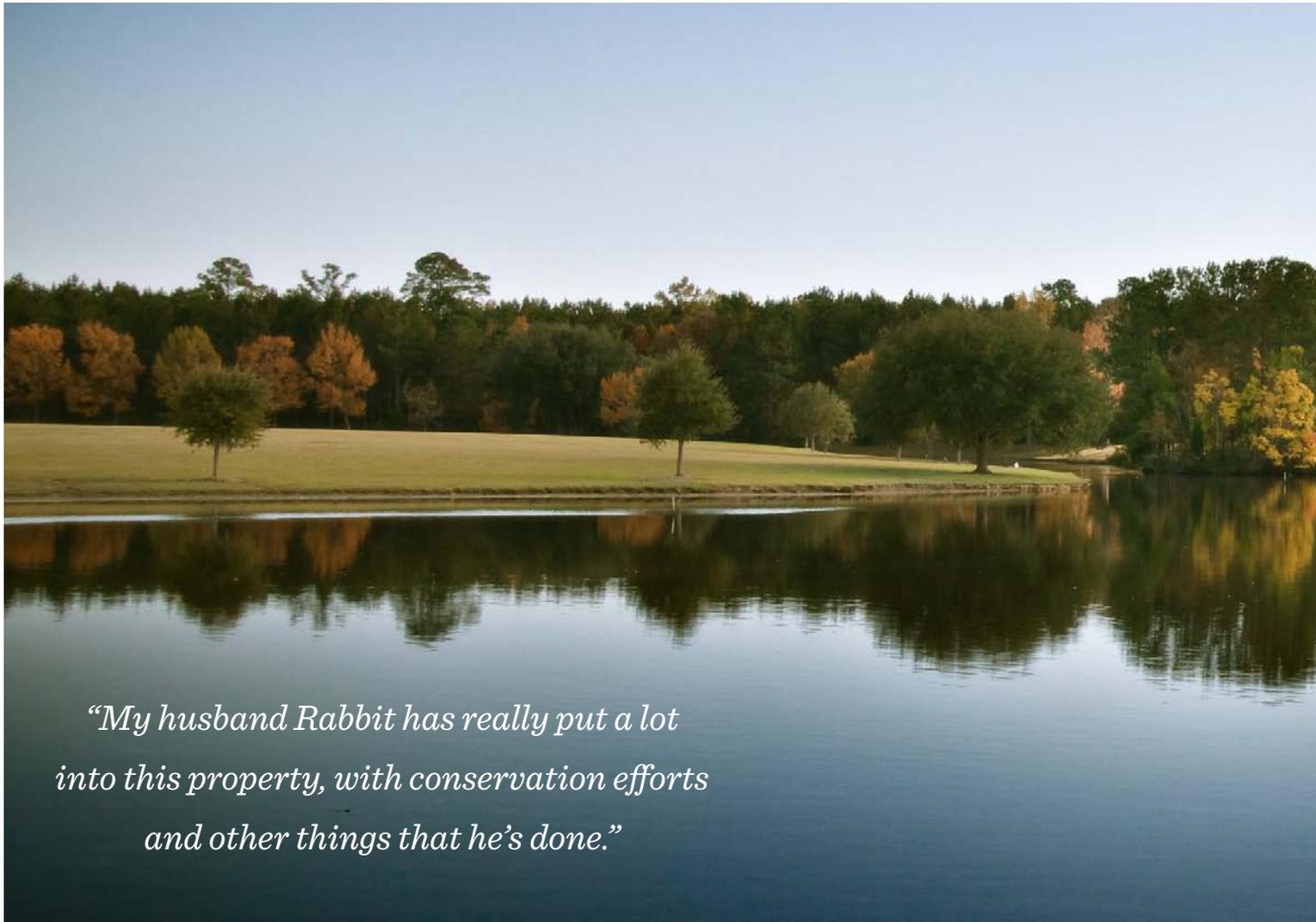
***Your reporting has taken you all over the world to foreign locales such as Egypt, China, and Costa Rica. With so many exhilarating assignments, is there any one that stands out as most memorable?***

We traveled to Croatia during the war in Bosnia to do a story about refugees, so we went to the refugee camp and covered how difficult it was for the people living there. At the time, we would try to be as economical as possible and start shooting as soon as we landed. So immediately after we shot

the refugee camp, we went to the children's hospital in Croatia to shoot another story. When we walked into the children's hospital, a young doctor who spoke very good English said he wanted to show us a film they had put together and I thought, *Oh, this is the last thing I want to see.* But since we had to charge our batteries anyway, we went in and sat down in a little auditorium in this hospital and they rolled a video on the injuries of these children that came to them from the war in Bosnia...primarily little boys between 10 and 12 who would pick up off the ground items that looked like little helicopters, except when they picked them up they were actually explosive devices that took their hands off. By the time we had watched about 30

to 45 minutes of the video—it still makes me emotional now—I was going, *Oh my gosh.* And it wasn't over...we then went to see the kids. By the time we were through, I just had tears rolling down my cheeks. I was walking around and kept saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" to the photographer and the producer who were with me, and they said, "You wouldn't be human if you didn't have that reaction."

***For me, one of the most memorable Debi Chard moments came during another instance when you seemed—much like at the children's hospital—to give into your emotions momentarily. It was during your coverage of the looting going on after Hurricane Katrina; can***



*“My husband Rabbit has really put a lot into this property, with conservation efforts and other things that he’s done.”*

***you remember what it felt like to confront the looters?***

I was so upset! I had been hearing on the news about how people were afraid of these looters, and the people were upset because they felt like the media was treating it like it was a lark. It was pretty clear when the looters knew what they were doing was wrong when they saw us, because they would jump in their cars and then cover their license plates. And gas was hard to come by, so clearly they had gas from outside the area and had come in with the intention to loot...I just had to confront them about how they could take advantage of people in their most vulnerable state.

***Which brings up a good point...although you clearly have moments when you***

***can’t help but let your emotions surface, you always manage to remain completely objective covering the news. Bearing witness to so many sad things, how do you maintain the sense of stoicism that is mandated by journalistic standards?***

You have to tell yourself and remind yourself that there has to be something so horrific in the minds of the people who do these bad things; that’s really the only way to make sense of it. But I see a lot of good in news too. You can’t always focus on the one bad thing that may happen once every three months. Every night we usually do cover something bad, but that’s what news is—covering the unusual in the community. We really try hard to put the good things going on in the community in the spotlight

as well—like through our community news section on the website where people can look and find out what’s going on in their own neighborhood. But it’s also our responsibility to talk about what you can do to fix the things that are wrong.

***With so much early success, what prompted your decision to stay in Charleston in an industry where talent is constantly moving to bigger markets?***

Oh, a couple of things. First of all, there was a point in time when I did have offers to go and tough decisions to make, but I wanted to have a family and was trying to start one at the time. A few years later, my sister was working for the big networks and the correspondents were telling her that they



wanted to retire and move to Charleston one day, so I realized I was very fortunate to be here in the Charleston area. Traditionally, if you have a job in this industry, you work for a few years and then move and work for a few years and then move. Basically, at the time when I was supposed to be doing that, I liked where I was and didn't want to move away—my friends and my family were more important to me. Also, we had a station owner at the time that was giving us tools that very few others in the industry had. We were a small market media company, but were one of the first six or so in the country that had a satellite truck. We were staying on the cutting edge of the industry, so I had the best of both worlds: a beautiful city, a wonderful community, family & friends, and the tools to work with. So it was a no-brainer! I felt happy—

and still do—working for a company that is focusing on the right things.

***Were you ever presented with an opportunity to be a news journalist in a bigger market that proved hard to turn down?***

There were offers that were more difficult to turn down than others, so my husband said, “Okay, I’ll move once.” However, looking at the industry, I knew I was in a job that would require me to move again and again. And I don’t blame him for not wanting to bounce around; we were trying to start a family and build a life. We needed somewhere to plant roots. So I set my priorities on what I wanted out of life in the long run...that’s a good thing, right?

***Luckily for the Lowcountry, you decid-***

***ed to plant roots in Huger on Longwood Plantation. There is such an abundance of wildlife here—hens, geese, dogs, horses; what is it like spending your down time in an environment so drastically different from your work environment?***

It’s really nice because I can truly unwind and relax. My cell phone doesn’t even work out here! Sometimes I feel disconnected, but at other times I think that might be a good thing. Longwood is simply beautiful, and I really enjoy spending time here. My husband, Rabbit Lockwood, loves the trees and the birds and the horses. He has really put a lot into this property, with conservation efforts and other things that he’s done. I have enjoyed taking in some “rescues;” we love the fox squirrels and have a rescue fox squirrel on the property named Osa. We



Large windows frame the kitchen, offering Debi nearly panoramic views of the scenery beyond.

also have “Trouble,” our rescue peacock that roams the property. Having so much land out here has also enabled us to get marsh tacky ponies, a passion of Rabbit’s since he switched over from polo after a bad accident. Yes, after that experience, his wife was emphatic that he give up polo!

***Your interests are diverse...clearly a passion for wildlife is amongst them. Also, in addition to staying on the forefront of news, you have acted as a producer and dabbled in writing. What are some of your other favorite hobbies?***

I like to play with the interior décor in the house and change things around...I did the window treatments in many of the rooms, and I like to move them around as I see fit. I also spent three years getting a certificate in meteorology from Mississippi State, because I find weather to be the most interesting thing; it’s the number one thing people want to know about. I’ve always been interested in it and wanted to know the mechanics of it, so I thought it would be

worth it to pursue a degree in it. Devoting time to the charity Debi’s Kids is also very important to me.

***Can you tell us about Debi’s Kids?***

Debi’s Kids is in its 18th year now, but it all started when I was working a split shift. I would wake up in the morning and take my kids to school and then go to work, pick them up, go to Wal-Mart, get them fed and ready for bed, and then go back to work to do the 11 o’clock news. One day in October, the Wal-Mart manager stopped me and said, “We had this charity program in a Wal-Mart I managed in Tennessee; would you be willing to do it?” And I said, “Well yes, I’m willing, I just have to check with the station to see if they think we can pull it together.” To make a long story short, we did and it just kind of took off. The Wal-Mart manager named it Debi’s Kids. So it’s not a replacement for Toys for Tots or Angel Tree or anything; we all work together for a greater cause. The Salvation Army is our partner that qualifies and helps put the

program together. They have a database that families can qualify through and prove their need, so everything is documented along the way. We also pair with a community Christmas service so we can look and see which families have applied for Toys for Tots so there is no overlap. We are trying to serve the whole community, so we want to make sure as many people are reached as possible. We always say, “If you don’t give to us, that’s fine- just give to somebody!”

***Your husband, Rabbit Lockwood, recently retired as a Charleston harbor pilot. Has being married to someone who spent their life (and made their living) working on the water influenced the look of your home in any way?***

Oh yes! In addition to being a harbor pilot, Rabbit grew up on the Battery in downtown Charleston, so he always had a maritime connection in his life. In our living room downstairs, we have paintings of several boats that were significant in his family’s history. Rabbit’s great grandfather Thomas

## THE HISTORY OF LONGWOOD PLANTATION

*excerpted from Longwood Plantation, longwoodplantation.tv*

For over three centuries, an unusual round hill in the Lowcountry of South Carolina has carried the name “Pompion Hill.” The spectacular view it provides of the sparkling waters of the East Branch of the Cooper River captured the hearts of a wealthy French Huguenot named Pierre de St. Julien de Malacare and his family in the 1600s. Almost a century later, Pompion Hill Plantation—as it was known at the time—was the scene of a Revolutionary War skirmish; just one mile from this site, the Patriots surprised and scattered the British Guard at Quinby Bridge, part of the infamous “Raid of the Dog Days.”

Known today as Longwood Plantation, the land remains much the same as when Pierre fell in love with the pristine property. Surrounded by verdant pastures and abundant wildlife, Pompion Hill overlooks its impressive neighbor Pompion Hill Chapel, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The 300-plus acre historic plantation, with glistening ponds, moss-laden live oaks is not only a home to endangered wildlife, but also a working polo estate with a regulation polo field.

J. Lockwood was a blockade runner and a harbor pilot so, from time to time, was on board the ship that hangs over our mantle—the Francis Elizabeth. Rabbit found a picture of the ship off St. Simon’s Island and had a wonderful giclee copy made that he took it to artist John Doyle to paint. Since the Francis Elizabeth served as the model for *The Spirit of South Carolina*, Rabbit then gave the painting to *The Spirit of South Carolina*, where it now hangs. Of course, we had the copy made for our mantle! Other nautically-inspired items decorate the living room as well...a coffee table made from a ship’s hatch, lamps crafted from fire hoses on a tug boat. We even have the little desk Rabbit used growing up that his father brought home from a tugboat. Rabbit amazes me because we are so different. Because of his engineering background, he feels that everything has to work; that is important to him. He doesn’t care if it looks good, it just has to work. I’m

*(left)* The sunroom is ideal for observing wildlife and enjoying the neighboring scenery. *(right)* Nautical decor, such as a model ship and a coffee table crafted from a ship’s hatch, reflects Rabbit’s maritime upbringing.





(above) Debi charms a peacock—one of the many varieties of fowl found on the plantation—with a piece of bread.

the opposite...I don't care if it works, but it has to look good! So I guess we complement one another.

***Raised in downtown Charleston and a graduate of the Citadel, Rabbit comes from a family entrenched in Charleston history. Is it true the same great-grandfather you mentioned a moment ago—Thomas J. Lockwood—is rumored to be the inspiration for Rhett Butler in Gone with the Wind?***

There was an article written that referenced the passage in *Gone with the Wind* in which Rhett Butler is described as “the most daring of all blockade runners.” The article then goes on to describe Thomas J. Lockwood’s exploits at sea, which implied the connection. And I suppose I can see Rhett Butler’s personality in the stories

we’ve heard about Thomas J. Lockwood. A famous story about him is that he went to Havana and the ladies of Havana made a Confederate flag for his ship. However, they weren’t supposed to fly them in port because the ports were supposed to be neutral. Thomas’ next stop was Nassau, though, and he sure enough put up the Confederate flag. Bahamian authorities complained because he was coming into a neutral port flying a Confederate flag and shouldn’t be allowed to do so, so they told him he needed to take it down. Being the character he was, he climbed up the mast himself, nailed the flag to the mast, and then greased the mast all the way down and welcomed anyone who wanted to take it down to go right ahead. Of course, there’s no way of getting it down at that stage! So, my point is not that he was a Confederate that makes him like Rhett Butler, but that

he had a notorious personality. I think that is where the Rhett Butler rumor comes from.

***What do you love most about your home and what would you change in your home if you had the opportunity?***

Well, my friends and family used to joke that before I moved in this place looked like a fish camp. It was definitely a bachelor pad! We have pretty much redone the whole house, although I like to think we didn’t change it so much that it is unrecognizable. I love that this is basically a farmhouse. We are used to dogs running around and grandkids running around. I like that it’s comfortable and livable, and you don’t have to worry about getting things dirty or messing them up. It’s just a great place to really *live*. ❖