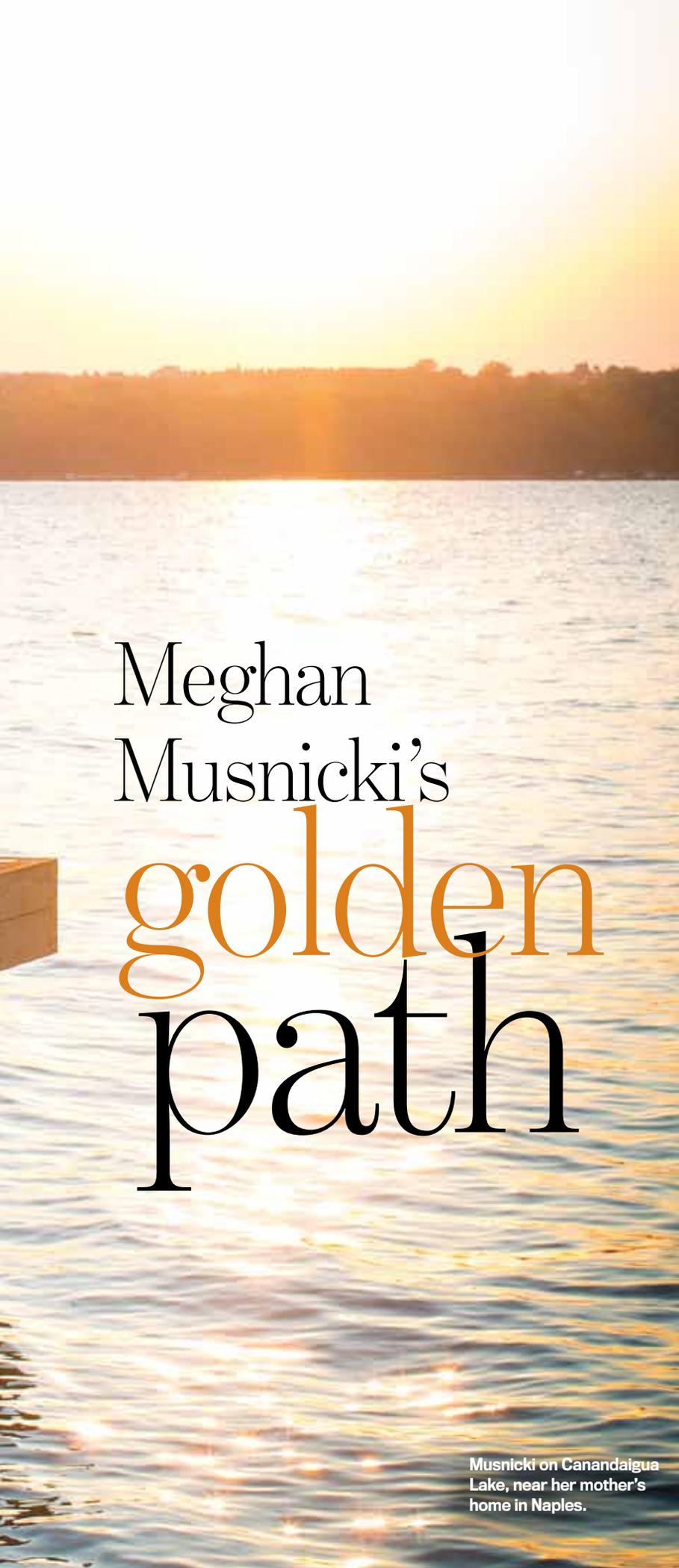


who'swho  
noteworthy neighbors





# Meghan Musnicki's golden path

Musnicki on Canandaigua Lake, near her mother's home in Naples.

Her struggle.  
Her refuge.  
Her inspiration.  
Her victory.

Story by **Marci Diehl**  
Photos by **Matt Wittmeyer**

ONCE UPON A TIME, MEGHAN MUSNICKI was just another teenager coming into town from her home “up on the hill” in Naples to play soccer with her girlfriends. Back then, no one would have guessed she would win a gold medal in the Olympics as a member of the 2012 USA Women’s Eight rowing team—least of all “Moose” Musnicki herself.

Hers is an All-American success story: small-town girl reaches the pinnacle of her sport on a world stage. Of course, the shining moment at the top doesn’t show the lows along the way.

## What you don’t see

When you’ve won a gold medal, everyone wants to see it and touch it. Yet few people ever see the sacrifice and hardship behind a medal hanging around a winner’s neck. Often it’s no fairy tale.

Growing up in Naples, life did seem ideal at first. Musnicki got her fill of athletics: swimming, sailing, tubing and fishing with family on Canandaigua Lake in summer, and skiing on the ski team at Bristol Mountain on Friday nights in winter. That kind of life in a small town “was all I knew,” she remembers. “I hung out with my girlfriends all the time, just doing stuff.”

She also played basketball, because she was growing tall. And taller. Taller than anyone in her class, and then taller and stronger than even the boys. It bothered her. A lot. Today she brushes the underside of 6 feet tall, and she loves to wear high heels. But in high school, everywhere she looked, she says she saw only

"5-foot 5-inch skinny-waisted girls and Victoria Secret models in the media. I didn't fit the social norm of what was supposed to be a pretty teenaged girl. I didn't look like everyone else."

For a young girl in a small town, that can be devastating. She set out to get skinnier, trying to become something she was not, and it took a major toll on her heart, mind and body.

"I was not happy, and I wasn't very healthy."

Eventually, her solution was to flee.

She transferred to Canandaigua Academy in her junior year. "It was tough to move someplace where nobody knew me and continue my junior and senior years." Sports became her refuge.

## Heart and heartache

Despite growing up by a lake, Musnicki didn't row until she got to college at Niagara University. The flaws she saw in herself—being long and strong—were the very qualities that rowing coaches look for in recruits. She made the team, but halfway through her freshman year, her father, Bill, died of a massive heart attack.

"I was very close to my dad—definitely a daddy's girl," Musnicki says. Her father, a former athlete and trainer-turned-builder, "came to every sporting event. He was very active in my life. He was one of the 'loud dads,' but I obviously loved having him there. He played a big role in it all."

Musnicki was just 19. To deal with the loss, she took inspiration from what she had learned from him. "He worked all of the time—really, really hard. He kept going when things were tough. He just... kept going."

That became her mantra. "I took comfort in rowing, in my teammates and in the structure of my everyday life. It was an outlet for me to work hard and free myself from anything that was going on in my head that—if I were just sitting in my room—could become overwhelming."

She transferred to Ithaca College to be closer to home and her mother, and her collegiate rowing career took off. She



MARIE DE JESUS/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

**Meghan Musnicki got a hero's welcome when she returned to Naples in August after winning a gold medal at the London Olympics.**

became team captain and a 2005 First-Team Division III All-American.

She never imagined rowing was an option beyond graduation. But then she was "discovered" in 2006 at a rowing club in Boston and recruited for the national team. She didn't make the 2008 Olympic team, but she was invited to the Princeton headquarters to train for the national team for the 2012 Games.

Rowers must qualify every year to be part of the team, and Musnicki has done so since 2010. Along the way, she has racked up a long list of medals and records in national and international championships.

But the price is high and the pay nonexistent. Depending on the time of year, the team trains two to four times a day, six to seven days a week. Like many of her teammates, Musnicki lives with a host family in Princeton, relying on donations and family to make ends meet. She has cleaned houses and walked dogs to make some money.

And the training itself is punishing. "So many times in Princeton, you come home from practice in tears because it was terrible and you're tired and overworked. It's easy to not see the light at the end of the tunnel. You can be overwhelmed with the

prospect of trying to make the Olympic team," she says.

"But the reward for me is so great. In the end—even with all the bad days—I love what I do. I love rowing. I love racing. I love competing. I love pushing myself further than I ever thought possible and seeing what new limit I can break through."

## The payoff

Team USA Women's 8 Rowing is a dominant power, undefeated in world competition every year since the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In London, in six minutes and 200 heart-bursting strokes, the eight women and their coxswain blasted ahead and won the gold.

Winning was "pure elation. It's indescribable," Musnicki remembers. "You've worked for years leading up to that point, gone through all of those times when you don't want to keep going and it's been hard, and the end goal has been the Olympics—the gold medal—and you have it! It's right there, and it's about to be handed to you. It's an amazing feeling, unlike any other feeling in the world."

Medals in hand, "Moose" (a nickname she has had since childhood) and her teammates were free to enjoy London. For her, that meant shopping with her mom, Gail. It helped that Armani Cosmetics treated her to a makeover at Harrod's. "I love shopping and makeup—that's my thing! I'm one of the girly ones."

Next came a whirlwind in New York City, where the team rang the bell at the

New York Stock Exchange, were guests at *Forbes* and *Self* magazines and did a cooking segment on the *Today* show. In September, Team USA was invited to the White House.

Then, at long last, Meghan Musnicki came home to Naples. She rode in a convertible down Main Street in a parade containing every fire engine and vehicle that had a siren within a 15-mile radius. Just about every person in town lined the street, cheering her.

The ensuing ceremony on the steps of the Memorial Town Hall was pure Americana. The mayor spoke, a dedicated poem was read, politicians gave proclamations. Friends, family, neighbors, media, former teachers, coaches and community members—many dressed in red, white and blue or carrying flags and signs—stood for hours waiting to greet their heroine. Awestruck little kids presented flowers and had their pictures taken with their very own hometown idol.

Musnicki calls children her “greatest joy,” and how she influences them matters to her. “I don’t think of myself as some kind of hero. I’d like to think I’m a positive role model for young and adolescent girls.”

Now, as a role model, she wants to use her own life experiences to help. “I hope I can provide a sense that it’s OK not to be way skinny or look like you popped out of a magazine—that doesn’t make you any less pretty or less desirable. You’re still beautiful. Go after what you want. Attempt to stay true to yourself and what makes you happy.”

On a rare extended break at home this fall, Musnicki was able to do some speaking to tell that story. She worked out, of course, but she also vegged out on the couch with her mom, watching a certain “K-themed” Hollywood reality show. And she caught up with old friends.

Then it was back to Princeton, to training and her host family, to more dog-walking. Eventually, she plans to pursue a nursing degree in obstetrics.

But not just yet. When the future is mentioned, a steely glint comes into her eyes. Meghan Musnicki is working—really, really hard—and she keeps going because she knows where she wants to be in four years: In “the Eight” in Rio, home of the next summer Olympics. **C**

