

Llama Sculptor Louise Judge - Fulfilling Her Dream

by Dee Gibney



Louise Judge was destined to sculpt llamas. Even as a toddler she loved sketching, painting and molding plasticine into animal shapes. In school an art class teacher told her she had a special talent and not to waste it. But sometimes destiny bypasses our plans and chooses its own roadmap for us – with many detours along the way.

For Louise the first major fork in the road was her father. He disparaged her love of art, “a frivolity”, and her dream of going to art school – the prestigious and very selective Ontario College of Art. A prominent physician he also used his influence to thwart her alternative dream – to become a child psychiatrist as this was too lofty an aspiration for a woman. Women should be nurses. So Louise became a nurse. Drawn to work with troubled children she went on to become a psychiatric nurse dedicating herself to children with extreme emotional disorders.

What she discovered during her years with the Children’s Aid Society in Ontario was a high level of sexual abuse among very young girls, but at the time there was no recourse for them once

they were removed from the home. So she decided to start her own residential treatment centre.

Partnering with Ruth Chambers, a social worker who shared her passion for helping extremely abused children, she invested her own savings and built a residential haven in the Ontario countryside with its own school, a staffed home for the children, and a separate home for herself and Ruth. It was the first of its kind in Canada. They called it Cricket Hollow because it was built in a hollow and the sound of chirping crickets punctuated the still nights.

Louise and Ruth turned their mutual love of children and animals into a unique therapeutic program for the girls. So damaged were these children that many of them were psychotic, needing medication and constant supervision. Many having known only neglect and abuse were distrustful and fearful of adults.

So Louise and Ruth decided to introduce Borzois and Afghans to the residence. The elegant, graceful long haired dogs are sweet and docile in nature and can be very empathetic towards humans.

Each girl was assigned a dog, as companion, friend and confidante. The dogs, says Louise, loved the children unconditionally. “Even if you stuck gum in their hair, they still loved you.” Louise designed therapy sessions using the dogs as conduits to the girls’ innermost thoughts and feelings. With time and patience, questions would be subtly directed so that the girls would describe what they thought the dog might think about a certain behavior or feeling. Slowly, over time with the ever gentle dog at her feet, each girl would begin to reveal her feelings.

The girls trusted their pets and also had to learn to groom and care for them. Nurturing another creature was new to them – and a skill they would have to learn should they one day become mothers.

Louise also introduced the girls to the art of sculpting, making simple pots out of clay. She acquired a porcelain kiln and began making dog sculpture trophies for dog shows.

But the work with the young residents



was demanding and arduous, filled with long days and nights of often wild and erratic behavior on the part of the children. Cricket Hollow's reputation as a refuge of last resort for untreatable children spread and they remained at capacity for two decades.

During that time 260 girls were rescued from lives of unimaginable terror and abuse. Many of them now have children of their own and continue to stay in touch with the two women who made such a difference in their lives.

Cricket Hollow closed its doors in 1989 when Ruth had to return to her roots in Oklahoma to care for her ailing mother. Not able to find another partner able to handle the intense rigours of caring for such troubled children, Louise decided to accompany Ruth, along with eight of the Borzois, and pursue further educational opportunities in psychiatry in Oklahoma. Because of her special area of expertise, she quickly landed a position at the state psychiatric children's hospital who sponsored her immigration.

In the meantime they looked for a property in the country to enable Ruth's mother – and the dogs – to live with them. They found a large rambling property near Norman that had a barn for the horses they planned to acquire and a kennel license for the dogs.

Louise's path was about to change again. One day while visiting a wildlife park, she found herself staring into the eyes of a beautiful llama that had poked its head into the car window. "I knew I had to have a llama," she says. "There was an instant connection." And that is how Bobby and Andy came into their lives – two llamas rescued from the stockyards. It was another fork in the road.

Louise began sculpting llamas. Then she and Ruth began to attend llama shows. They bought llamas to breed – even entertained the idea of raising therapy llamas to take into nursing homes and hospitals. Ruth was now working at the same facility as Louise and even though her mother was no longer with them, life became too hectic to train llamas for therapy.

The llama herd grew. It was to be their

retirement project. Louise built a studio to devote to her llama sculptures. In 2011 they retired from their hospital jobs while life with the llamas took on more momentum. More llamas to buy, baby llamas to birth, llama shows to attend, llamas to sculpt and llamas to show.

Studio 568, Louise's onsite display studio is filled with llama sculptures, each one unique and mounted on unusually beautiful Sham Mu wood harvested from the gnarled root stumps of logged trees in Fuyan province in China. With its intricately grained surfaces of swirling whorls and jagged hollows and depressions the wood is a sculptural element in its own right, often used to craft vases, bowls and jewelry boxes.

"Ideas for new sculptures are always racing through my head," Louise says, even in the middle of the night. So I get up and I go to work."

Many years ago, when her father died she had discovered among his possessions, a letter of acceptance to the Ontario College of Art. She had after all been accepted all those many years ago, but he had hidden the letter.

It has been a circuitous path but destiny had still pointed the way, just not in the way Louise had expected.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," she says with a serene smile. "I love children. I support children's centres. I have always been interested in psychiatry and sculpture. And I love animals. It's all come together. I live in a beautiful and exciting world."

So many people, she says, live unfulfilled scripts. "I won't be happy until I lose 30 pounds. I won't be happy until I'm earning \$100,000. I won't be happy until I own the house of my dreams."

"My 'untils' are over," she says. I am living my dream.

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About the Author

For the sake of a story Dee has gone hang gliding with the world aerobatic champion in Utah, crashed and lived to tell about it. She has worked with Scotland Yard in London investigating triad gang activity. She has ventured into Hong Kong's Forbidden City. She has ridden on boats, planes and trains, canoes and junks, gliders, back hoes, construction cranes, snow plows, window washers' high-rise swing stages, camels, elephants, horses, motorbikes and ATV's.

As a former newspaper photo-journalist based in Hong Kong and London England, a TV reporter for CBC Vancouver and investigative newsmagazine producer for CBC, TVO and CTV's W5 in Toronto, Dee produced exclusive stories involving leading figures in politics, medicine, art and business as well as international stars of stage and screen. Her work has received national acclaim. As a newspaper photo-journalist based in Hong Kong and London England, Dee spent several years landing exclusive interviews with leading figures in politics, medicine, art and business as well as stars of stage and screen.

