

The GCAA Presents:

THE PAINTBRUSH BLOG

by Gillian Joseph

Today I spoke to Linda Johnson from *Calico Zoo: Fine Fabric Creations* whose lovely stuffed animals can be found and purchased at the Artisan Store. When



Linda talks about her life, you might say that she's been a mover and a shaker. Well, certainly a mover for sure. Linda was born and raised in Ottawa, Ontario where she met her Moncton-raised husband Don. They've been together for many years living and travelling across central and eastern Canada with their family.

Linda learned to sew in high school, but didn't do a lot with it initially. One of her first moves was to Brockville where she attended what was then the Brockville College of Art and Design, learning the craft of weaving and spinning. As well as weaving she "dabbled" with other

mediums including stained glass and macrame, but nothing seemed to stick. Once she had her own children, she would make toys and Hallowe'en costumes for them and sew toys for her friends as well. But working full-time with a family means you often don't have a lot of time left to be creative. A move to Montreal for her husband's work found her at a loose end with lots of time to reflect on what she might want to do. So, why not go back to her first love, she thought...sewing! Little did she know that her fate was about to be sealed.

Another move, this time to Barbados! Again, to keep herself busy, she sewed stuffed animals as gifts for friends. Then one day, a young man came to pick up one of these gifts – a man who owned a shop in Pelican Village who, upon seeing the stuffed toys, was so excited about them that he proposed to sell a bunch of them to tourists in his shop. It took her a few months to get up courage to do it. But during the Christmas season she took the plunge and gave the entrepreneur a



bunch of her beautiful stuffed animals to sell. On Christmas day he phoned her. No special greeting, not even a “hello”. He simply said “you’ve got to get help...I’ve sold them all!”. That was the beginning of her business, and for three years she sewed up a storm to supply his store.

Then, another transfer back to Montreal and yet another to Guelph where she sold her toys at local craft shows and in the GCAA Artisan store. Not too far away lived her daughter, a professor at the University of Guelph who has since moved to Georgetown. Linda lived in Guelph for 9 years, and has been a member of the GCAA for eleven. Her husband is also a creative photographer who, like Linda, is associated with the Artisan store.

Finally, Linda and Don returned to Fredericton, New Brunswick where they live with a peaceful view of the St. John River – near to their son (a former hockey player for the Ottawa 67s) and other family and friends. It’s a simpler way of living she finds. Yet visiting Guelph is still a treat for Linda – she really misses the people she got to know here.

I ask her what her favourite stuffed characters are – and she tells me that she only makes the ones that she enjoys. One of her very favourites is the rocking horse. The elephants, she tells me, are the most popular, followed by monkeys and long-eared bunnies. She makes each one slightly differently, their personalities emerging as she begins to sew. Always looking for something new, Linda makes them larger or smaller for variety. However, recently she was asked by a gift shop in St. Andrews by the Sea in New Brunswick to make whales and mermaids. She looks forward to seeing how well these new toys are received.

With a room absolutely full of fabric Linda hopes that the future will be kind to her health-wise so she can keep on creating and sewing. She remarks sadly that the cost of the top-grade cotton that she uses is going up, once \$10 a meter now rising to over twice that price today. Yet, she loves to search for bargains, finding that her passion for buying material makes her look at all textiles differently now – more for their potential to make toys with character. It’s the colours that grab her and motivate her to create each little personality. On behalf of children (and adults) everywhere, Linda....sew on!