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CELEBRATING LIFE WITH STYLE

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KATHERINE LARSON

Portrait of
an Artist,
a Diva &
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By
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IN MUSIC, THERE IS HARMONY. IN HARMONY, THERE IS PEACE,” reads a saying conspicuously posted in Katherine Larson’s office/living room. One insight into the occupant’s philosophy. On the refrigerator door in her tiny, immaculate kitchen, is another: a lengthy, neatly typed list of highly ambitious goals for the year. One-third of the entries had been crossed off within the first six weeks

of 2001—and that is just a hint at the owner’s accomplishments during the first four decades of her life. “I’m a goal-oriented person and, I must admit, I’m a driven person. My work never ends—but my work is also my hobby and the way I relax,” Katherine Larson says, as she glances at her to-do list.

Many people aspire to devote their lives to the arts, but very few actually manage to do that—and if they do, they often

focus on one form of art. Not Katherine Larson. She is a gifted opera singer, a talented muralist, professional writer, graphic artist, advertising executive and book illustrator. The rise-to-greatness story of her life reads more like fiction than fact.

In a picturesque bungalow on the west side of Ann Arbor, Larson runs a one-woman advertising agency, designs web sites, paints illustrations for children’s books and the covers of publications,

practices for operatic appearances, and sketches designs that will become murals on the walls of restaurants or private homes. Hallmark distributes the stationery and gift cards she has created. "I'd like to say that my life is following a plan that I outlined many years ago, but my life has really been a circuitous journey full of surprises," she says.

The journey actually started relatively late in life. Although she had sketched all through her childhood, Katherine Larson had never taken an art lesson before she decided to major in fine arts at Ball State University in Indiana. Her first art professor told her that her sketchbook was the best he had ever seen, that all she needed from him was guidance on how to use art materials.

During the summer after her freshman year, she landed a prestigious job as a graphics designer, despite having no experience in the field. At the end of the summer, after much soul-searching, she decided to turn down the offer of a full scholarship and stay in the work force. She

rapidly began climbing a prestigious career ladder, one that took her from Indianapolis to Phoenix and back again in 1983, when she learned her mother was dying of cancer. After her mother's death she launched her own advertising agency, which she named *Momentum Advertising Agency*, in memory of her mother.

At the age of 27, her musical career was launched unexpectedly when she joined a church choir. Unable to read music, she had purchased a CD of Brahms' *Requiem* and practiced. The night of her first choir practice, she hit the high note and saw her fellow choir members turn and stare at her. "I thought, 'Oh, my gosh, I've done something terrible,'" she remembers. After the rehearsal ended, the choir director told her she had "quite a set of pipes." He urged her to consider operatic music and recommended that she train with an opera singer to develop her voice.

"I was running my own advertising agency at the time and I loved doing that, so I decided to consult some experts

before deciding if opera was really something I could successfully pursue," she says. She met with three experts, all of whom told her she had a rare and wonderful voice. "My voice is categorized as a spinto soprano, an unusual voice type that has both a strong high range and a warm, full-bodied lower range," she explains. "That allows me to sing what I consider to be the most dramatic, passionate roles written for women: *Tosca*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Turandot* and *Aida*." The experts predicted that she could have a fine career in opera, but warned her that she had to study and work quickly because her voice had already matured. "Competitions end at a certain age and in order to compete, I had to train as well as learn the languages of the opera," she says.

In 1990, she decided to move to the University of Michigan to study music under Lorna Heywood, while continuing

OPPOSITE: Katherine Larson performs "Tosca" at the Opera Lenewa.

BOTTOM: Katherin's first mural, a humorous 40'w x 12'h creation for the Ciao! restaurant in Southfield, MI.





to work long-distance for six of her best advertising clients. The diva-in-training traveled to Rothenburg, Germany to study German at the Goethe Institute and to Florence, to study Italian at the British Institute. While in Italy, she studied the world's great murals and supported herself by painting.

Katherin set herself a challenging goal: within ten years of beginning her study, she intended to sing *Madama Butterfly*. She reached that goal in two and a half years. The South Bend Tribune called her *Madama Butterfly* performance for the Indiana Opera North "astonishing—a powerful high range that topped the orchestra's fortissimo and delicate pianissimos that could be heard in the back row. Not only could she sing, but she could act, as well."

She then created a whole new set of goals: to break into the Ann Arbor mar-

ket and perform *Tosca*. She played the title role of *Tosca* with Lincoln Opera of Chicago and OPERA!Lenawa in Adrian. She has also performed Verdi's *Requiem* with the Toledo Symphony, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with the University Musical Society of Ann Arbor, and Strauss's *Vier Letzte Lieder* with the Ann Arbor Symphony. Her dramatic portrayals of Puccini and Verdi heroines won her national and international awards and effusive reviews. But the cost was high. "In some cases, it takes a year to get those songs in my voice, with 100 hours of coaching at \$80 an hour," she says. "I love to



perform, but the constant work and travel made for a very lonely life. I had no home, no family except for my father, who is a constant traveler himself. I had no anchor anywhere."

After assessing her life, she decided to leave the stage temporarily, bought land and a cabin on a Michigan lake, and thought about her future. "I had reached a level of professionalism where I had to decide if I should devote one hundred percent of my time to music or split my time 50:50 between two careers," Larson explains. She returned to the advertising world

and, she says, she rediscovered the joys of living a “normal life.” “Splitting my time between two professions has kept me sane and based in reality. It’s difficult to remain in touch with yourself when you are constantly on the move, when you live in costumes on stage, and when you are the center of attention and applauded for everything you do,” she says. “There are many wonderful moments, but you also have to be tough to take the criticism and back-stabbing that are also part of that world.”

Larson returned to Ann Arbor and bought a quaint old bungalow on a tiny dead-end street, which is not only her home, but also her art studio and headquarters for her advertising business. She spends her “spare time” experimenting—very successfully—with new forms of art. Larson painted jungle murals “in the spirit of Rousseau” for Ann Arbor’s Zanzibar restaurant and she redesigned Great Harvest Bread Company stores, then created murals in the tradition of Depression artist Thomas Hart Benton for their



walls. She paints Observer covers and has illustrated a children’s book called “Today I Was Baptized”. “The style of my work could be called romantic,” she says. “I love to show people and animals in movement.”

Meanwhile, she also constantly tests her voice and plans a return to the stage. “I love to work—but to me, nothing that I do seems like work. Work is doing all the things that I love to do, that I have a passion to do,” she says, leaning back in her desk chair and petting her constant companion, a rottweiler named Elsa. **A**

OPPOSITE: This warm and romantic style mural graces the Great Harvest Bread Company store in Birmingham, MI. Measuring fifty feet in length, the impact it had on sales resulted in a corporate video which brought Katherine several jobs with Great Harvest Bread Company stores throughout the country. TOP: For the Van Gogh Restaurant in Farmington Hills, MI, this mural is an enlarged replica of a Van Gogh original. BOTTOM: A close-up detail of the jungle mural in Zanzibar Restaurant in Ann Arbor, MI.