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An interview with
artist Katherine Larson

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Current Conversations

PT Quinn ► Sight and Sound Artist Katherine Larson

When master muralist and soprano singer Katherine Larson recently sang a solo during the Ann Arbor Symphony's season-ending performance of Mahler's Second, the control and the dynamic timbres of her remarkable and powerful vocals captivated the fortunate audience, filling Hill Auditorium with an interpretation worthy of such a palace.

But Larson has another voice. A visual one.

Owner of Diva Designs, a company specializing in graphic design, photography, copy writing, Web site design and market development, Larson has the unparalleled ability to express an idea through her versatile artwork. From illustrating inspirational and children's books, as well as doing commercial art like logos, Larson is best known for her sweeping colorful murals. Having done over a hundred commissions so far, her mural inside Zanzibar's on south State Street may be her most famous and most written about in Ann Arbor. Another private commission was for the Irwin Building on north Main Street – a stunning masterful sky-view panoramic of Ann Arbor encircling a lovely grand staircase as viewed from the mythical ruins of a castle. Jim Irwin, owner of the building, proudly beamed about Larson when he said: "Kathy has such a can-do attitude. The finished product exceeds what I imagined it to be ... She is one of the most gifted artists I have ever met – or seen!"

Larson also goes to schools and teaches kids how a mural is done – giving the students hands-on guidance to its completion. She also addresses a class on art techniques by having them work on a canvas. Having hailed from South Bend, Indiana – and after following a stint in Phoenix, Arizona – Larson now makes her home in Ann Arbor.

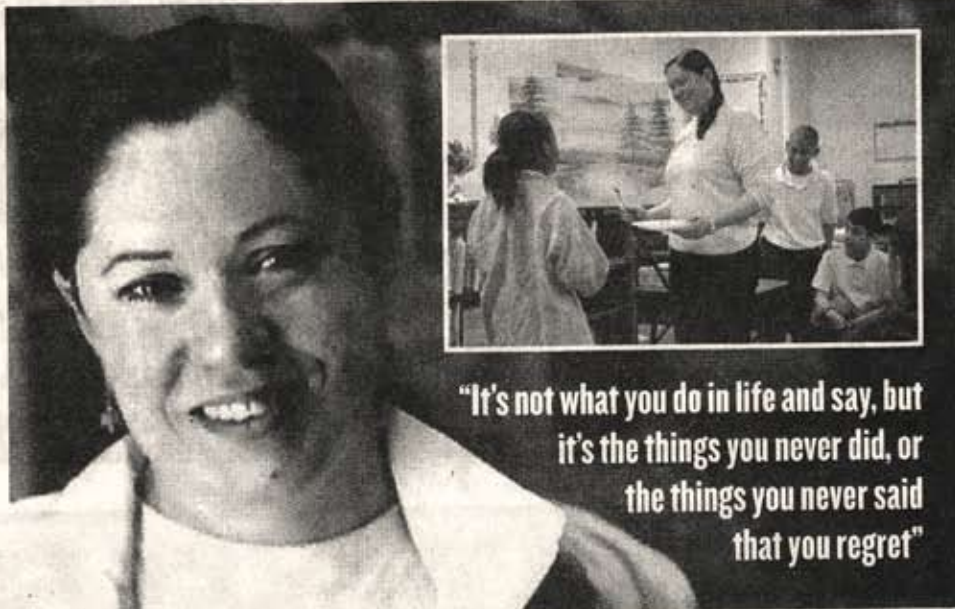
What inspires you to do what you do?

When I was 26, I was working on a [promotional video] for a nursing home in South Bend, when I wandered into a room where an elderly 96-year-old lady named Claire was. I was being silly and got down on my knees to interview her and said, "I know I'm a lot younger than you are, and know that older people have wisdom, can you give me some wisdom?" She said, "I want to tell you that it's not what you do in life and say, but it's the things you never did, or the things you never said that you regret." It struck me as profound. She went on to say, "Honey, anything you want to do, you do it now. Don't have any regrets when you become my age." I started to cry. I had been considering singing at that point. I was running an ad agency

and was very successful. And taking off to do a singing career – everybody thought I was nuts. But I remembered what she said and thought, this is my heart, and this is what I want to do. That woman changed my life.

So that's how you got into music?

I was living in Phoenix and came back to South Bend. My mother was dying of cancer at the time and unfortunately passed away before I could make it back. At 27, I was trying to figure out what to do with my life.



"It's not what you do in life and say, but it's the things you never did, or the things you never said that you regret"

That's unusual – starting music later in your life. Especially a person of your caliber.

I had a few piano lessons when I was a kid and had a gift for remembering melodies. So when my brothers and sister played the piano, I would actually play what they did without knowing how to read music. When I was around seven or eight, my piano teacher thought I was brilliant, then gave me a Bach piece to play – but again I didn't read a note of music – and gave it up until I came back to South Bend years later. I said to one of my [art] clients "I've never been married, and maybe I should settle down in South Bend, but I didn't know any guys in South Bend, and I'm not really a bar person."

She said, "Why don't you join our church choir because we have single men in the choir and some in our congregation." I told her I didn't know how to play, but she added, "That's OK, because none of us know how to play either." I would just copy what the person next to me was singing. The music was fast and I couldn't keep up – and she said, "Well, that was quite interesting. I bought a [recording] of the Brahms Requiem and copied what I had heard. I didn't think I had any ability in music, but knew I did in art."

Everybody stopped singing when I went up to the high notes. After, the choir director told me she wanted to speak to me. I thought she was going to say, "Thanks, but no thanks, we can't use you." But she said, "Where did you get that set of pipes from?" And, "We're going to make you a soloist." continued 76

Katherine Larson continued from 7 I studied with a [teacher] from Germany, and that's how I got started in opera.

So you liked opera?

Oh no! [laughs] I thought it was totally queer – like men wearing breastplates and horns ... oh yes [giggles] ... that's what I really thought it was. I wanted to sing pop songs or things like [choir music], but he gave me an aria and said, "Just have a look at this." I went out and bought the opera and just fell in love with the music. At 31, I decided to move to Ann Arbor and study music at U-M.

When did figure out that you could draw pictures, and they looked good?

At around seven – about the time the teacher thought I couldn't play the piano. I drew a picture of a tree with my dog beneath it. I drew all the branches and the leaves, and my teacher put it up on the bulletin board. All the other kids were doing those popsicle trees with the round thing on top being held up with a stick. I was kind of embarrassed but a bit flattered at the same time. I thought I must be good at something, so that's when I started to focus on my art.

Obviously, you have evolved in your artwork. You do everything from commercial art to illustrating books to the whimsical and lifelike murals you're most known for.

When you look at Picasso, early on he was very basic. But later, when he got into cubism, he really pushed the envelope in modernism. I look at paintings I did four years ago and wonder how I did that. It's like looking at someone else's work. I can't relate to paintings I did a week ago now! [laughs]

Do you think music and art makes a better person?

Oh yes. It brings out the inner being of a person's self. It's all encompassing in its creativity, and the focus is a great benefit in other aspects of a person's life.

You can contact Katherine Larson and see examples of her work through her website: katherinelarson.com.

