

Conversations with the Irrepressible Dolly Curtis



Pretty much anyone who knows Dolly, and most in Easton do, knows that there are no short stop-and-chats with her. The conversations will be long and Dolly will do most of the talking. Sometimes a listener will wonder where she's going when she embarks on a magical mystery tour of her ideas. Just when the listener is lost, Dolly will interrupt herself and say, "I'm getting to the point," and remarkably she brings her story full circle in an utterly lucid way.

An Easton legend, Dolly Curtis can't be pigeonholed. A public access television personality, interviewer, textile artist, patron of the arts, volunteer, baton-twirler, she...

Wait, What?



Dolly Curtis at one of her favorite places, the City Lights Gallery in Bridgeport. Artwork, Claude Desir, Jr. Photo by Rick Falco

That's right. Dolly was a drum majorette at New Rochelle High School. She won an academic scholarship to Penn State, where she tried out for the all-male Penn State Marching Blue Band and got an angry rejection note from the director, James Dunlop, for her troubles.

"Never do that again," he wrote. The rejection was intimidating in the moment, but Dolly put her skills to better use. She spent Saturday mornings teaching baton twirling to at-risk girls to help them build self-esteem. "It gave them incentive," Dolly said, "and they started to improve their appearance and they became more ambitious." Ever since, Dolly has taken adversity and cast it aloft until it twirled out of sight.

Among her many friends, Courier Executive Editor Nancy Doniger has known Dolly for

more than 20 years. They met back when Doniger was managing editor of the old print Courier. “Dolly would come to our Shelton office to update us about exciting people and places she knew about through her radio program, *Backstage Buzz*, her public access TV show and her beloved hometown, Easton. We all learned she loves to gab. Although small in size Dolly has an indomitable spirit and a huge heart,” Doniger said.

At 78, she still has a lot of horsepower which she attributes, in part, to proving her worth to a demanding, super-independent mother. “My mother was progressive, smart and tough,” she remembers. As a result, Dolly was an accomplished student, who earned her bachelor’s degree from Penn State in secondary education and later a master’s degree from NYU.

“I loved Penn State. It was a jewel of a place full of interesting, different people,” she remembers, “and I met Jack there.”



Standing beside a sculpture by local artist Valerie Rhodes, Dolly found the perfect outfit.

Photo by Rick Falco

A Love Story

Jack Curtis, her husband of 60 years, who died last year, was the love of Dolly's life. A landscape architect in training at Penn State, Dolly knew he was "the one" and boldly suggested that they get married. "I'm so glad I did that," she remembers, even though the two were so different. "He thought I was a hot Italian, but I was neither hot nor Italian! He was tall and handsome with a completely different perspective on life," she said.

Neither his nor her parents approved of the union at first. Jack's Lutheran family rejected the little Jewish girl from New York. Dolly's mother was no happier. "Don't ever come home," her mother told her. "You made your bed so lie in it." Dolly's dad blessed the marriage and sent the couple \$500 with which they bought a VW Beetle. It took two years for her mother to come around, but she came to love her tall, charming and talented son-in-law.

The couple moved a few times after graduation, but Jack's love of "trees, wildlife and water" led them to Easton in 1979. "I didn't love the idea. I was screaming, 'I got New York in me,'" Dolly said with a laugh and a discernible New York City accent. Used to "New York stimulation," Dolly couldn't imagine herself in a rural community.

But as she always does, she adjusted and thrived. Her kids, Kara and Jason, went through the Easton school system and thrived as well. "I owe my sense of curiosity and love of learning to my mother," Kara said. "Her love of life is contagious and a role model for living life to the fullest. Without a doubt, she instilled confidence in me as a young girl, letting me know that I could do anything if I put my mind to it and gave it my all—just like her."

Dolly launched a television career using her gift of gab to interview celebrities and local

characters over the course of 300+ public access television shows and numerous radio programs on WPKN in Bridgeport. She also made many friends as an active participant in Easton's organizations and town meetings. Helping people, especially creative people, is in Dolly's DNA. But more about that later.



The painting above and in several other photos featured in this article is by local artist Claude Desir, Jr. Photo by Rick Falco

Heartache

A series of events including breast cancer, heart surgery, knee replacement and Lyme disease threw roadblocks Dolly's way, but nothing prepared her for the end of her lifelong romance with Jack, whose brilliant career dimmed with dementia and ultimately confined him to a nursing home for four years. "I didn't want to see it," she confessed.

“But it kept me up at night.” The shattering loss of her beloved Jack to Covid on May 2, 2020 is perhaps the only blow from which she hasn’t recovered. “I had my first Christmas without him in 60 years,” she noted with sadness.

Jack succumbed alone without Dolly’s comforting patter which fascinated him throughout their union. “He liked listening to me and I like to talk. He said I amused him.” In all their years together, “Jack had the same twinkle as when he met me,” she added wistfully.



Dolly’s peeking through the frames handmade by artist and framer Steve Gerber. Photo by Rick Falco

Rebound

Most in town know Dolly for her many years of service to the Easton Arts Council where she has curated shows at the Easton Library for 32 years. She loves to nurture new artists, encouraging them and arranging for their work to be seen. Having worked at the Greene Street Gallery in New York City early on in her career, Dolly has a practiced eye for many different art forms including painting, photography, textile art and glassworks, which her son Jason produces and Dolly energetically supports and promotes.

“But Dolly’s passions aren’t limited to the visual arts,” observed Joanne Kant, Easton Arts Council President. “Dolly is a good theater critic. She keeps up with theater performances and offers a wonderful perspective.” At EAC meetings, “Dolly’s time” is always on the agenda. Kant calls Dolly “effervescent and bubbly” and enjoys singing “Hello Dolly” to her at gatherings.

A longtime member of Citizens for Easton, Dolly is concerned about maintaining Easton’s agricultural vibrancy as well as the town’s clean air, pure drinking water and open spaces. Her longtime friend and CFE member Leslie Minasi said, “I cannot even remember how we met, perhaps when I joined Citizens For Easton during the Trout Brook Valley initiative. Her perseverance in the face of adversity, always with a smile and a giggle, the joy she takes from life and spreads, and her energy are a force of nature. She is a pint-sized powerhouse.”

In observance of Easton’s 175th birthday, Dolly has been conducting interviews with Eastonites of note including Ed Nagy, Dick Greiser, Bill Kupinse, Andy Kachele, Dottie D’Amato and Mary Ann Freeman for the town’s oral history project. Her interviews can be read at <https://www.eastonlibrary.org/easton-oral-history-project>.

Lea Sylvestro, another of Dolly’s longtime friends fondly remembered, “We used to talk with the greatest love and affection about Will Tressler as ‘Easton’s rural character.’ Dolly can claim that title too. She has opinions on all issues important to Easton and shows up at almost every meeting to become better informed and take action where needed. She has dedicated herself to her passions and the town. And, in her beads,

bows, feathers, and flowers, she has always done it in a colorful way!”

The question many ask is how does she do it all?

“I’m interested in so many things,” she says. “I love to learn and I’m in a different gear than other people. I get high having a creative idea. My mind is so busy.”

That only accounts for her intellectual curiosity. Where does she get the energy and the will?



From every angle, Dolly’s a strong and merry survivor. Photo by Rick Falco

“I don’t allow myself to wallow. Jack wouldn’t want me to be down.” Instead, she said, “People want to be around people who are happy. I’m happy as a clam in Easton. The town has been so good to me and I feel safe here.” Doniger agreed. “Dolly is the first to say how grateful she is for the support of her town and its people during these hard

times. But nothing can keep her down for long. She bounces right back.”

And bringing things full circle, Dolly added lucidly, “It takes an effort. When I’m sliding and listening to the music of the 1950’s, I get nostalgic. Then I say, ‘Dolly, we can’t do that. Can’t cry me a river.’ It’s okay to be sad, but then I lift myself up.”

All photos were taken by Rick Falco at City Lights Gallery 265 Golden Street, Bridgeport. Suzanne Kachmer, executive director.

For more information about the gallery: <https://www.citylightsgallery.org/>