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LOLLY BENNETT

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Captain Lolly Bennett
Photo: Tom Gould

LOLLY BENNETT: SMOOTH SAILING

by JOHN THOMSON

There's a slight chop on the water as the stubby, little ferry *Spirit Three* glides into the dock on Vancouver's Granville Island. Three passengers disembark while another four wait patiently to climb aboard.

"Hi, where are you off to?" asks the captain ready to take on another troupe. The boat pulls away and heads east on False Creek to David Lam Park, Yaletown, and Science World.

"Are you going one-way or round trip?" she asks. After processing everyone's charge card, Lolly Bennett opens the throttle to start the journey. *Spirit Three* is one of 17 boats in the False Creek Ferries fleet, the older of two companies that carry tourists and commuters up and down Vancouver's inland waterway. Lolly, originally from Manchester, England, has taken to skippering, well, like a duck to water.

"I spend hours in the fresh air and meet loads of people," she says. "The wind changes, the water's calm and then it's not. It's clean and fresh and engaging. How pleasant to get on a boat and give yourself 15 or 20 minutes to wind up or wind down. It's a lovely little jaunt."

Today it's a bit blustery, abnormally cold for a Vancouver spring morning, but that doesn't dissuade Lolly from chatting with a young couple from Switzerland. They tell her they plan on going to Whistler the next day. Lolly commiserates over the lack of sunshine – it's starting to rain – but tells them Whistler should be ideal because "you're going high above the cloud line so there may be snow AND sunshine." They respond by telling her about where they live and leave the boat as fast friends.

Naturally gregarious, Lolly likes talking with her passengers and will often point out landmarks along the way. In the summertime, the ferries are swamped with cruise ship passengers, but a surprising number of locals use False Creek Ferries as a water taxi. There are nine stops up and down the waterway, but Lolly never knows the routes she's been assigned until she shows up for work. She's an early riser and prefers to take the early shift.

"The busiest stops are probably Yaletown, Sunset Beach and Science World," she says. "Our main commuter traffic is from Sunset Beach to Granville Island."

Lolly's been skippering for the past three years, drawn to the life by a chance encounter with another female skipper.

"This one girl, Alita, was quite a happy girl and she was always smiling and so I said to her 'you're always smiling. Where are you going?' and she said 'Oh, I'm driving the boat today.'"

Boat? What boat?

"It was her enthusiasm that caught me. She was so jovial about it, and I said to her 'I'm going to do that one day.'"

Lolly already had a job. Stability and a steady pay cheque. But she was restless. A sudden career shift would scare most people, but undaunted, she popped in on False Creek Ferries operations manager Jeremy Paterson.

"I said 'hey, are you hiring?' and he said 'well, we can be.' I said, 'what do you need?' and then he said, 'a small vessel operators permit' so I promptly went online and signed up for a course."

Lolly spent over a thousand dollars for a one-week intensive course on navigation, VHF radio, first aid, and marine emergency duties administered by Transport Canada. Permit in hand, she went back to Patterson and got the job. She admits it was a bit scary hitting the water.

"I remember being white knuckled on a windy day. I was challenged and a little bit nervous."

But she persevered and on her second shift, she saw Alita on the dock.

"Oh my God," said Alita. "You're my hero. You said you were going to do it and you did it."

"Lolly's a great ferry operator and we all feel lucky to have her as a member of our crew," says Paterson. "You can tell she's good with people. We can teach the boating skills, but we can't teach the people skills. That's an inherent quality that they need to have and that's always something that we're

Snapshot

with Lolly Bennett

If you were to meet your 20-year-old self, what advice would you give her?

"I would tell my 20-year-old self to be fearless. I wasn't fearful. I was scared. I was afraid of the world. I think I was asleep all those years before. What was missing for me was my own personality and when I arrived in Vancouver by myself without my siblings, I came to life."

Who or what has influenced you the most and why?

"My foundational influence was the family I was fortunate to have experienced in my early growing and teenage years. The stability it provided has been a driving force and requirement in my own life. As for Gavin, he is a great gift to me. [Parenting] has allowed me the opportunity to grow deep and wide as a human being."

What are you grateful for?

"I am very grateful to have a huge sense of adventure and being healthy. Little things fascinate me, and it keeps me curious which makes me very happy."

What does success mean to you?

"My definition of success is knowing you're happy and comfortable in your day-to-day life because when you're radiating happiness and confidence and joy, that's what other people pick up on."



looking for."

Lolly's positivity is infectious. Chatting with a young woman on the way back to Granville Island after dropping off her other passengers, Lolly discovers her current fare works for a local ballet company.

The young woman says she's premiering a new production.

"Do you like dance?" she asks. "Would you like a ticket?" "Oh, I would love one," replies Lolly.

"Are you free tomorrow night? I'm going to get a ticket for you," the woman promises. Lolly is beaming. A free ticket is nice but engaging with people is its own reward.

Lolly attributes her success to her loving family and no-nonsense northern England upbringing. Dad was a painter/decorator and Mum "was a lot of fun." Her parents named her Lorraine but because her siblings (she's one of seven) couldn't pronounce Lorraine properly, it became Lolly and the name stuck. With such a large family, the focus was on getting down to business.

"I don't think I ever heard the word 'failure' in our vocabulary," says Lolly. "It was just move forward. Just get on with it. I remember saying to my Mum once, 'I'd like to write something, Mum' and she said, 'like what?' And I said 'I like books and I like poetry. I think I'd like to write something.' And then she said, 'you want to write, Lolly? Well, bloody well write.'"

The family emigrated to Canada in the late 1960s, landing in Toronto and settling in Hamilton, Ontario.

"All we knew was love. We were unconditionally loved," says Lolly. Loved but constrained too.

"I felt like a duckling. I followed my older siblings around. I followed the one ahead of me, she followed the one head of her, and she followed the one ahead of her. We moved around like ducklings because that's how it goes in a big family."

By the time she was an adult, Lolly was ready to leave the nest and spread

her wings. She moved to Windsor and then London and finally to Vancouver.

"My girlfriends called and said, 'you gotta come out here, it's great' and so I did and I never left."

She got a job with Via Rail, working the dining car and turning down beds in the roomettes. It wasn't glamorous but she loved socializing with workmates and passengers. She was married now but unfortunately the union soured and Lolly and her three-year-old son, Gavin, fled to her parents, now retired and living on BC's Sunshine Coast.

"It was the darkest of dark," she remembers. "I didn't know anything about single-parenting because I had lived in a two-parent household with multiple siblings. We were born and raised next to our grandparents."

"Everything that I had seen in my growing years was not my new reality. I told myself I have to put all of my energy into Gavin and that's where my focus has to be. I wanted to stay present in everything that was in front of me: my loving parents, my son's joy. Those things were in the forefront of my mind, and I really worked hard to stay there."

Thanks to her supportive parents and a job opportunity at Via Rail, Lolly eventually found her footing. The railroad was upgrading its passenger service and the company wanted to train Lolly as a facilitator, bringing other employees up to speed on the new procedures.

"It was that training that changed the course of my life because my jobs from then on were more in the facilitation line. I've got people skills. I like people and I trust my instincts and I'm compassionate. I didn't want to just survive; I wanted to thrive."

Years later, as a building manager, she honed those people skills organizing barbecues, gardening projects, and a recycling program for one of Vancouver's first purposely built rental buildings. The company vision was inclusion and participation "so that people living in apartments really felt like they had a sense of community." She was particularly active in recycling.

"I contacted the Boys and Girls Club

in the neighbourhood, and I said, 'do you have someone that can pick these bottles up?' And then all the refundables went to the Boys and Girls Club. It literally raised thousands of dollars over a period of time."

As a result, Lolly received a 2018 BC Achievement Award acknowledging her community work.

"I was moved, and I was touched," she says. "I've been fortunate in that regard because I wasn't good at school, and I didn't like school but I do like learning things and I like to watch things and I like to participate."

"Here we are at Granville Island. Mind your head," she says as *Spirit Three* returns from its 20-minute downstream shuttle. Her passengers disembark and Lolly connects with a scheduler on the dock. A three-minute turnaround and she's off again.

"Driving the boat is easy for me," she says but don't expect to find Lolly on the bridge of the *Queen of Coquitlam*, or any other BC Ferry, anytime soon.

"I don't have any aspirations to drive a bigger boat," she says. "I'm very happy where I am. My big passion that keeps me anchored is yoga. It just feeds my soul."

In addition to yoga, Lolly parlays her organizational and social skills into other endeavours, such as freelancing as a landlord's agent.

"I look at the apartment, I access what needs to be done to

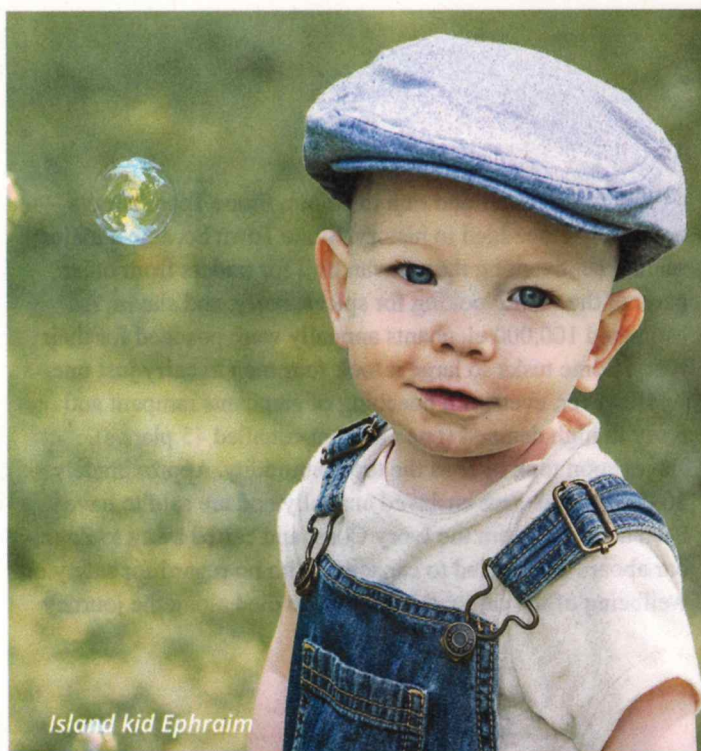
make it move-in ready, I call the trades, I coordinate the work and then I tell the landlord this is what it's going to cost."

And for the last 20 years she's been working with Clinical Teaching Associates, a grass-roots organization which instructs medical students, naturopathic doctors, and nurse practitioners on the intricacies of sensitive pelvic examinations. Sure, medical schools tackle the subject, but students practice on plastic dummies and as Lolly says, plastic models don't tell you what hurts and what doesn't. CTA members focus on a more personal approach using their own bodies and experience as guides. Lolly is presently writing a podcast on the issue, which she is going to narrate.

"My role is to articulate the bridge between the practitioner and the patient. I'm a storyteller," she says. "I'm compassionate and I'm empathetic because I have a sense of where people are coming from."

Lolly acknowledges her own dark moments and the effort it took to get back on her feet and that makes her a perfect listener and advisor. For her it's that no-nonsense northern England upbringing: just buckle down and get on with it.

"I am a happy optimist," she says. "Living in the moment brings me so much joy. I have learned to invite into my life the things that bring me joy, and I can tell that my patience in bringing myself joy is paying off. That's what I want and there's no reason why I can't have it." |



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