

KERRISDALE PLAYBOOK

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THE WOMAN BEHIND THE CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL – MEET LINDA POOLE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF VANCOUVER CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

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By Taylor Lecky

Photos: Noriko Nasu-Tidball

Special Thanks to **VISUAL SPACE** (film location)



Kobayashi Issa once wrote, "there is no stranger under the cherry tree." Before my interview with Linda I knew I appreciated the sentiment behind the saying but I didn't fully understand it. In honesty, when I was first asked to write an

article on the [Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival](#), I had no idea what to expect. Apologetically, I stereotypically made an assumption that an individual of Japanese descent would walk in the [Visual Space](#) Dunbar gallery that rainy Vancouver Tuesday afternoon. However, I was extremely naive. Linda Poole, with all her golden haired glory, glided into the room as an elegant cherry blossom-like individual herself. Wearing a fuchsia pink skirt with matching leather shoes, a cherry blossom pendant and bracelet, you could not deny that she exuded passion for Vancouver's sweetheart of tree's.



"Is pink your favourite colour?" I asked while wearing my daily uniform of head-to-toe black. "No, I enjoy many colours. However, CBC did once interview me on T.V in which they started the session by filming these exact pink shoes. I don't wear them much anymore," Linda laughs. "But I do think pink looks good on everyone." Linda's demeanor is energetic and passionate while at the same time extremely calming.

Having lived abroad with the Canadian Foreign Service with her husband, a Canadian Ambassador, Linda says at the beginning she asked herself, 'what does an ambassador really do? Let alone what does an ambassadors wife do?

"It was a fantastic experience and a privilege. I didn't want to leave. Everyday I would see the Canadian flag flying above our official residence and I would just choke me up. You're so far from home but your representing and presenting your country."

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The Woman Behind The



Cherry Blossom Festival –
Meet Linda Poole,
Executive Director of Vancouver
Cherry Blossom Festival

Posted by Keiko Honda on Feb 5, 2015



Linda's creative ventures didn't start with the Vancouver's Cherry Blossom festival although her artistic pursuits have always valued culture, inclusiveness and curiosity. During her time in Kuwait, Linda partnered with an Ottawa artist to create an art exhibition named Dualities; a juxtaposition between the death and destruction of nature home to Ottawa compared to the Kuwaiti invasion also known as the Iraq-Kuwait war that took place in 1990. Through this exhibition rich of history and powerful art, Poole became immersed in the city and culture as she became close with ministers and other individuals who wanted to be a part of the show.

Reflecting on her time in the Middle East, Linda remembers asking the Minister of Information, Alioub, why this posting was so special to her. He replied, "Linda, you came to our country with an open heart and you loved us, so we loved you more." "It was pretty special," Linda smiles. "I'll never forget it because if we all lived like that think of what a change that would make." It is of that type of spirit that the VCBF embodies, one of friendship, community and an open mind.



Linda gives tribute to her friend Knobusan, a Japanese Diplomat with whom she met and became very close with during her time in Haiti. She remembers Knobu saying the word 'Sakura' while describing the

annual Cherry Blossom Festivals in Japan, Poole admits she instantly fell in love with the idea.

"I didn't even know the word Sakura," laughs Poole, "but I vowed to myself, when I get back home I will start a cherry blossom festival."

Seven years later the first VCBF took place in 2006. Linda expresses her gratitude to Japan for the original five-hundred cherry blossom tree's that were sent as gifts to Vancouver. Today, Vancouver is home to more than 40,000 cherry tree's with a mandate to sustain and grow more. One of Linda's favourite cherry blossom streets in Vancouver? The sky train station at Burrard and Melville where Cherry Jam kicks off their festivities every year. A celebration of musicians and performers who uplift Vancouverite's spirits on their daily commutes through downtown with songs, dances and the readings of haiku's.



"That's what I liked about the cherry blossom tree," says Linda. "All winter we're all huddled, we're all closed off under umbrellas, shivering, and we all look down. And then all of a sudden the sun comes out, spring is upon us and the blossoms come out which make us look up and feel gratitude. It's like a wave that takes over the city and unfolds."

As this year's festival quickly approaches taking place between April 2-29th, Poole says she's ecstatic about this year's new performances and projects. As BBC World Travel named Vancouver as one of the Top 10 Cherry Blossom Festivals among Tokyo and Kyoto, Poole says there is a strong presence of culture.

"The festival is built on so much love," states Poole. From a kite dance accompanied by a Bollywood troop, to 10,000 haiku's being sent from 40 different countries for the annual haiku contest, it's evident that the cherry tree not only inspires human compassion, awareness and appreciation but as well new poetry, dance, music, art, design, choreography and cuisine.



"The idea's never stop!" States Linda, who says she gains her inspiration from the tree's as they're a gift for everyone. New to this year's festival? Tree Spirit Fairies. Think-a modern day Puck from A Midsummer Night's Dream with a Japanese flare who flits around singing, dancing, and improvising while spreading fairy magic.

Previously, Linda has stated that she believes in the power of the blossoms. However, what does this mean? What can a flower petal really signify one might ask?

"They're transcendent and awe-inspiring," Linda pauses, "they're indescribable. It's a personal connection, it's a feeling, it's so emotional. When the cherry blossom's open, it opens our hearts and we are in touch with our own feelings and more open to each other. I hear amazing stories all the time about what cherry blossoms can do for a person. They really make you feel, they're so reflective, they really are brave enduring Vancouver's weather. They don't exactly last long in the Vancouver rain-two weeks at most, but it's a strong reminder of the impermanence and fleeting beauty of the cycle of life."



During my time interviewing Linda I now too feel the power of the blossoms. Although Linda has said that this festival has been called 'frivolous,' it is in fact the opposite. It is a way of life, a celebration behind the power of natural beauty, counting one's blessings, appreciating simple things, being inclusive of other's

cultures, new beginnings, forgiveness, to be mindful and full of love. Maybe everyone has a different interpretation of a cherry blossom but a similar meaning. In Kuwait, when it rains, Linda mentioned that everyone would leave the city and go to the desert to see a tiny bit of green grow from the land, could that be Kuwait's cherry blossom as Lake Michigan is to Chicago? It raises the simple question, what is the cherry blossom to your life?

So what does an ambassadors wife do? You could refer to Linda Poole as the Cherry Blossom Ambassador although she has mentioned she does not like being referred to as so. However, after meeting an individual so charismatic who shares her wealth of kindness and passion of natural beauty with everyone in her city, I think it's safe to say, 'All hail Linda Poole, the Monarch of Vancouver's Cherry Blossoms.'

