

Vibrant B&B owner transcended constricted, somber childhood as partygoer and planner, vintage costume designer and decorator

Description

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Growing up in a strict Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn, New York, Sheila Ash almost never had a birthday party. Celebrations were reserved for the High Holy Days observed in the fall.

So, when this youngest daughter grew up, she became a partygoer, a party thrower, an event and wedding planner, hostess, costume designer and fashion consultant â?? not to mention tour guide.

She juggles these roles with her main gig: proprietress of a bed and breakfast, where she also lives, on Guerrero Street called Noeâ??s Nest. She has run the establishment for more than 23 years, but work does not keep her from play.

On one December weekend, the slender, 75-year-old brunette orchestrated a murder-mystery-themed dinner party at Noeâ??s Nest, attended the Dickens Fair in a crimson gown she designed, went to a gallery opening and then attended a monthly salon (live music and readings) on the 24th floor of the Ritz Carlton Residences.



Dressed for the Bay Areaâ??s annual Great Dickens Christmas Fair in one of her costume creations, Sheila Ash poses in her abundantly decorated living room. (All photos by Colin Campbell)

As she swans about town, she is often accompanied by her boyfriend, Dave Kong, a musician who works in information technology for a law firm.

A story of grit

â??We met at a wedding. He says I wear him out, and he is 15 years younger than me,â?• she said with a laugh, adding, â??I went younger â??cause the older ones are dead.â?•

Ashâ??s trajectory from single mother on welfare to established innkeeper and party-going gal about town after moving to San Francisco in 1977 is a story of grit, and as they say in New York, chutzpah.

She recalls a constricted childhood, where the world was viewed through the prism of Orthodox Jewish values, where the ghosts of her parentsâ?? Polish relatives who perished in the Holocaust were a palpable presence:

Clothes should be dark and somber, and material possessions were, well, immaterial. â??Our family values were intellectual,â?• she said, â??learning, study. If a book fell on the floor, you kissed it.â?•

The loss of so many family members in World War II had a significant impact on how Ash looks at life. She never knew a grandmother or an aunt. She wanted to live large for those in her family who never had a chance to.

She also had her own burden to bear: Born without a left ear, she was labeled â??handicappedâ?• in school. It caused her jaw to retract and her eye to droop, and she has undergone several surgeries to lift the eye. Her mom dressed her in bonnets and hats to hide the â??defect.â?•

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Her interest in clothes, fashion, hats, and style dates back to that experience. â?•I wanted people not to notice me, so dressing brightly and colorfully deflected attention onto the clothes, and in time that became my signature.â?•

A secret Xmas â??treeâ??

Another thing she desperately wanted as a child that the family faith would not allow was a Christmas tree. That was a non-starter.

So secretly in her room, she arranged a bunch of chairs and draped red ribbons and tin foil over them, vowing to marry a non-Jewish man so she could have her wish.

Now that sheâ??s on her own, Noeâ??s Nest during the holiday season is an explosion â?? inside and outside â?? of Christmas bangles, baubles, stars, a tree and statuary that delights guests and passersby.

There are, of course, Jewish symbols as well. In her bright bay window, next to a chubby snowman is a skeletal wooden rabbi with his prayer book. â??I bought him from the oldest synagogue in Hungary,â?• she said.



This Christmas, the bay window of Noeâ??s Nest is filled to the brim with symbols of Christmas as well as Judaism.

Thereâ??s also a menorah draped in blue and white tinsel glows under a row of sparkling icicles. A large golden Star of David shares space with wreaths, miniature sleds, and holly berries. All eight rooms at Noeâ??s Nest have a mezuzah, a symbol of Jewish identity, to bless each person who enters the door.

Her brief marriage in the late â??70s did double duty: â??Norman Ash was a nice, gay South African Jewish guy who needed a green card, and I needed a Jewish husband to present to my parents. â??

They didnâ??t know she already had a two-year-old daughter, Anais, born in 1975, whose father was an African American Buddhist. â??He was good for hitchhiking with through Europe, not so good at regular life.â?•

A double life

She lived with her daughter on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. By then, sheâ??d graduated from Hunter College with degrees in theatre and education. She became a fur coat model while teaching public school in Harlem and working in a doctorâ??s office.

â??It was a double life I was leading, hiding my daughterâ??s existence, a lot of good acting experience â??

In August, 1977, her parents gave the newlyweds a wedding present â??enough cash to finance a move to San Francisco. They never looked back.

The green-card marriage ended Normanâ??s immigration problems and the family landed in Noe Valley, where they lived together briefly. But Norman didnâ??t like changing diapers and wanted his freedom, so he moved out. â??But we had three-way calling so when my parents called, he would get on the line from his own place,â?• Ash said.

After their split, she got on welfare because she needed foot surgery. And she began exploring San Franciscoâ??s thrift shops.

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â??I haunted them all. As a single mom on welfare, thatâ??s all I could afford, but I found so many treasures.â?• You can see them throughout Noeâ??s Nest, including an antique gramophone, a pair of red and white striped Italian settees, and her Japanese tea set collection.

When she recovered, she began working several jobs. Nights, she waitressed at Panoâ??s Greek restaurant and Salonicaâ??s bar (both gone) on 24th Street; days, she taught school and placed her daughter in a co-op nursery school.

150 hats

She continued to amass her vast collection of costumes and gowns â?? and more than 150 hats, from fur to feathered to a beaded â??Cleopatraâ?• headdress. Itâ??s all housed on dry cleanerâ??s moving racks in her basement â?? the right outfit always ready to be plucked for the right occasion or client.



Flannel pantaloons keep Ash warm under her dresses.

She wears these outfits with the elegance of a ballerina. Indeed, often under her extravagant gowns are what she calls her â??faithful flannel pantaloons. They keep me warm,â?• she said.

She also rents out the outfits, dressing people for special events. â??People find me through word of mouth, from seeing me in my clothes, out and about. I never advertise my fashion consulting, and I am not on Instagram. â??

You want a hot pink, leather jacket studded with Swarovski crystals? Check. A cream-colored, vintage dress with 1,000 real pearls? Check. A puffy pink and blue, cotton candy ball gown made from crinoline. Check.

Her cell phone rings constantly to the tune of Leonard Cohenâ??s â??Hallelujah.â?• She speaks briskly in a no-nonsense manner, her speech still rich with the cadences of her native New York.

While she admits she â??canâ??t sew worth shit, she also designs outfits. She starts with an idea, finds the fabric, then directs her seamstress. â??Iâ??m very visual,â?• she said. â??I can envision exactly the look I want.â?•

Working in the tradition of Tikkun Olam, a Hebrew phrase meaning repair, restore, and rejuvenate, she makes vintage clothing fit to be worn anew and shared. In October, she put on a fashion show at the Far East CafÃ© in Chinatown with 15 models ages 15 to 55 in gowns from her collection.

In 1985, with the help of her ex-husband, she bought her first house, on 23rd Street in San Francisco. By then she had a second daughter, Kendra, from a 10-year relationship with another man. Ash didnâ??t intend to become an innkeeper, but she took the plunge to help pay the mortgage.

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Areaâ??s first B&B

â??By the mid â??80â??s, I had two daughters and a foster kid, and I needed more bedrooms, so I added some on.â?• Her second daughterâ??s dad helped with the renovations, and she started renting out two rooms to other single parents with whom she shared childcare.

Eventually, she began running her home as a bed and breakfast, an idea spawned by memories of the pensionÃ©s she had stayed in while traveling in Europe after college.

â??I was the first bed and breakfast in this area. When I started, there was no such thing as a license.â?•

In 2002, she bought an 1891 Victorian on Guerrero Street and transformed it into a licensed bed and breakfast. The house comprised 4,300 square feet on four floors and had a lush garden. She only needed to add a few bathrooms and a gazebo (her â??wine temple.â?•)



Inside Noeâ??s Nest. (Photo courtesy of Sheila Ash)

Today she runs Noeâ??s Nest with a staff of four: a bookkeeper, a cleaner, a carpenter and her elder daughter, who helps with the administrative tasks. â??I make the breakfasts,â?• she said.

Its eight guest rooms are furnished in her signature vintage style, and before the pandemic, they were booked consistently. Earnings allowed her to send her daughters to the private French American International School.

The business was a success, but when San Francisco went into lockdown in March 2020, she had to refund over $100,000 worth of bookings. Business has come back this year, but only to half of what it had been. â??I was so happy to make anything this year; after lockdown, anything I make I appreciate.â?•

And, running a small business is a constant juggling act.

Her cleaner walked out on her right before Christmas with the place solidly booked. So, the Wednesday before the holiday found Ash trudging up stairs with fresh towels and sheets after hours at Trader Joeâ??s and Costco buying supplies, unloading them at home and putting them away.

â??Itâ??s a good thing I still have the energy I have,â?• she said with a sweeping gesture from her perch on the stairs. â??I have created a life that I love, and I live the life I love. I want to inspire people to jump out of the box and do something outrageous.â?•

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