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Lora Lee Ecobelli
One Smart
Chickadee

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Lora Lee Ecobelli: one smart chickadee

by **ann e. butenas** | photos courtesy of **ms. ecobelli**



The historic photo of young Laurina Ecobelli captures the innocence of youth with a subtle confidence that refuses to acknowledge the travesty of abuse that could have easily and hauntingly embraced her presence. Instead, Laurina sits poised with the grace and elegance of someone well beyond her teenage years. The image captured in the 1921 photo suggests a young woman coming into her own while carefully masking the unsettling experiences endured at the hands of someone in whom she trusted. If ever there was a true picture of courage, beauty and triumph, it exists in this single frame, an undying glimpse of a legacy that, through a personally horrifying experience, teaches us that we all have the power within us to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles and touch countless lives along the way.

When Lora Lee Ecobelli and her brother, Los Angeles-based screenwriter Tom Ecobelli, were visiting their grandmother Laurina shortly before she passed away in 1981, she gave them a diary. Within the pages of that diary were the honest and sometimes painfully expressive words of a young Laurina who purposefully penned her story of sexual abuse by her stepfather when she was just 12 years old, an experience that resulted in a pregnancy for Laurina when she was but a child herself.

While Lora Lee and Tom both were somewhat familiar with the story, it wasn't until they immersed themselves into the pages of this dog-eared journal that the past came alive in ways unimaginable. This woman whom they adored as their grandmother gave them a gift through her words, a gift that she asked them to share with others so those whose voices were previously silenced by the deafening cries of abuse and the fear of public outcry would have a platform from which to speak.

"It was a very short but very poignant portrayal of my grandmoth-

er's experience," noted Lora Lee, who told of her grandmother being sexually abused by her stepfather, and the subsequent courage and faith she had to take her case to trial at a time where such courage was not only discouraged but almost impossible to act upon. "Tom and I were just blown away by what we read," Lora Lee recalled.

Laurina not only had the determination and wise-beyond-her-years presence of mind to take this man to court, but to bravely do so in the face of widespread racism and discrimination. Her actions generated a landmark case in 1923 which ultimately landed her stepfather in jail. Throughout this high-profile and controversial case, young Laurina continued to hold her head high. It was that determination and sense of purpose that eventually rallied others around her, creating a community where people soon reached out to others and barriers formerly designed for hatred were replaced with bridges built for the gateway to increased acceptance and ethnic tolerance.

When the diary came into their possession, Lora Lee and Tom both knew their grandmother entrusted them with a mission and a vision. The message in the book was not to stay with them. It was to be universally shared. "I did significant research on the story and was knocked out by the magnitude of what really happened back then," said Lora Lee. Calling upon her skills and talents as an actress, writer, producer, director, singer-songwriter and teacher, Lora Lee knew that she had something of great significance and wanted to follow through on her grandmother's wish.

A native of Ballston Spa and current resident of Saugerties, Lora Lee brings to the table a wealth of experience from her numerous roles as an actress on Broadway and in many off-Broadway productions, winning the Harold Clurman Award for Best Leading Actress in an off-Broadway Show for *The Vise*. Among the many stage performances Lora Lee in which has delighted audiences include *A Christmas Carol*,

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Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet, Aurora Leigh, Fire Exit, Sea Island, The Imaginary Cuckold, On Golden Pond, A Streetcar Named Desire and *Spoon River Anthology*. Accomplished in film and television as well, Lora Lee has enjoyed featured roles in *Judy Berlin, Carla, Jimmy's Café*, Comedy Central's *Upright Citizens Brigade* and MTV's *The Mom Song*.

She has honed her writing skills as a respected playwright with shows produced both regionally and in New York City. Many of her plays have been published by Art Age Productions, and Smith and Krause. She has also created a full-length play called *The Little Oasis*, which has been featured in two anthologies by Smith and Krause, Best Women Monologues of 1998 and Best American Scenes of 1998. Lora Lee has subsequently developed a screenplay from that version.

Not one to let the writing well run dry, Lora Lee recently finished her debut fiction novel, *Wanda-Allen*, and a family cookbook, *Laurina's Kitchen*, also co-authored with her brother, as a complement to the upcoming movie they are producing based on their grandmother's diary.

Her talents do not stop there, however. This show-stopping singer-songwriter has released four CDs covering a broad range of genres from county folk to jazz, and she has performed her songs at county festivals and has filled a few concert halls along the way.

Along with her late husband, Leo Burmester, and fellow actress Peggity Price, Lora Lee founded The Blue Horse Repertory Company, which is home to a variety of professional actors, writers and musicians who aspire to create exciting new works. Additionally, Lora Lee continues to collaborate with Peggity on various theatrical productions as a director and producer. This theater company, based on Arts on the Lake in Hudson Valley, is enjoying exciting growth with satellite productions throughout the region. Through this endeavor, Lora Lee also utilizes her

teaching skills training actors of all ages through various workshops. She also teaches acting at Russell State College in Troy through the New York State Theater Institute. Her plate is full, but she always endeavors to keep those creative juices flowing.

Her brother Tom is also an accomplished actor and gifted screenwriter who has several other screenplays currently in pre-production. His upcoming film, *Prairie Bones*, which he co-wrote with Susan Touchborne, will be directed by Connie Francis and will feature stars Melissa Leo, Paige Howard, Franco Nero and Danny Glover. Tom also has a television series in development, co-written with Heather George, called *Animal Lovers Only* which based on an animal emergency clinic.

Lora Lee and Tom now bring their collective talents and shared vision to the big screen with their upcoming film, *Chickadee*. Based on their grandmother's journal from 1921, and originally created as a stage play in 1995 that enjoyed rave reviews, these ambitious siblings have adapted the story for film. "I didn't feel the play told enough of the story, and I wanted to share more," explained Lora Lee.

The accompanying cookbook is a collection of favorite family recipes once enjoyed at Ecobelli's, a neighborhood family restaurant in upstate New York the family owned for 50 years until it was sold after Laurina died. It's also a memoir of sorts as it provides a fantastic collage of stories from people who were touched by Laurina's presence over the years as she ran the family restaurant, not only serving delicious food but providing heaping helpings of kindness along the way.

"My grandmother was an amazing woman," recalled Lora Lee. "She never became a victim of her experiences. She had a generosity of spirit that transcended all else. Her compassionate and giving nature is what people will always remember her for. She was the head chef of the restaurant, and it didn't matter if you couldn't afford to pay; she'd feed you anyway."



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prejudices at the time, and how this trial united a town and brought together formerly opposing classes in an effort to champion her courage and ultimate victory.”

Anticipating production to begin this summer, Lora Lee and her brother are excited about the phenomenal cast and crew set to represent this story. Among the celebrated actors include Chris Cooper, Julie Kavner and Elynn Burstyn. Of course, Lora Lee will also enjoy a small role playing the eccentric next door neighbor. “We are so fortunate to be working with an amazing cast and crew. Also, the director, Arthur Seidelman, truly shares in our vision and we could not do this without his award-winning creativity and dedication to the project,” said Lora Lee, who added that some initial location footage has already been shot in upstate New York in the actual places where the story took place, includ-

ing scenic spots along the Mohawk River and the Erie Canal way.

As Lora Lee speaks of her grandmother, the obvious pride in what Laurina accomplished is evident, but that pride comes through in a very compassionate and empathetic manner. “My grandmother entrusted us with a message to share to encourage others to come forth with their stories and speak their truths,” said Lora Lee.

As for the film’s title, that name was also inspired by Laurina. “She used to sing lullabies to us when we were little, and ‘Chickadee’ was one of them I will always remember,” said Lora Lee.

From a memorable song to a memorable film to a memorable woman, Laurina Ecobelli’s legacy will endure as those historic words lifted from the pages of her diary spring to life on the big screen. “We hope to film most of the movie locally to preserve its historical significance and to help the local economy,” stated Lora Lee, who noted that she is grateful for the tremendous support they have received from the community as a whole.

For more information, go online to chickadeethemovie.com.

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