



The story behind the 'Guardians of Nature'....

I thought it would be moving for anyone with an interest in our Project to understand the story behind how the 'Guardians of Nature' was born. Please bear with me, it's quite a read and it comes from a very sad place, but I promise you'll be inspired. Just....remember the night is always darkest before the dawn!!

Here is my very personal story:

I moved to Essex from Edinburgh 2008. I then found out I was pregnant with my son. I didn't know very many people in Essex and the thought of motherhood was terrifying. As if by magic, I met a beautiful, sweet, inspiring friend called Lorna who took me under her wing, over the years we had become inseparable. We both had small children Zion and Ellise, we were single mothers so we supported each other raising our children. Zion and Ellise knew each other as brother and sister. I then began volunteering, supporting people trying to overcome their battles with substance misuse at a charity called 'Open Road'. Later in 2011 my mother also moved to Essex to support myself and Zion. I had a great support network and loved my volunteer work. I continued to volunteer and eventually became full time staff. Everything was perfect !! Until, two months after my mum arrived, we got the terrible news that my mother had terminal cancer. She heartbreakingly died 3 months later, my soul felt destroyed. I continued on for my young son and with the support of my friends and my work, I got through the worst of it.

Two years later, another blow for our family and friends, Lorna, who had previously just recovered from breast cancer before we met, got the news that it had sadly returned. She was stage 4 and was given a year to live. How could I cope without her and my mum? Lorna's mum, Barbra stepped in and supported us both. We had adventures with all 3 of us with the children and laughed at her bedside. We all did our best to give Lorna her best life and we carried on keeping our children together and having fun on her good days. She lived for 2 years and sadly passed away in 2015, she was 33. Before she died I asked her "is there anything I can do, at all on this earth for you when you are no longer here". She replied "watch over Ellise for me" that went without saying, but I promised I would. And so, every weekend, she came to my home to be with us as we always did before Lorna passed away. In this time myself and Lorna's Mum Barbra became very close. She became a second mother to me. We were settled after our losses and came together as a family to support Ellise and each other.

Three years later we had another terrible blow. Barbra had stage 4 Lung cancer.. We were struck once again by this terrible disease. Ellise was going to have another loss, her beloved

grandmother. I begged social care services at the time for help for her, but there was nothing stable.

Barbra's treatment was intense and she could no longer care for Ellise, so honouring my promise and my love for Ellise, Ellise and I decided I would become her foster mum. She moved in with us and she was happy. She had a lot of loss and I tried so hard to get her support from services but she kept being moved around. There was no stability and no ongoing support and she had been going into dark places for years after the loss of her Mum, Lorna. She was happy with us, but as the reality of Barbara's illness drew closer she became dark again. She needed her own space as a 13-year-old girl. We tried our best to find a bigger home with her own room through housing, as she and Zion were sharing his room. Her mood became so dark and concerning, due to all her young brain had to process, so much so that it was no longer safe for her to stay in Zion's room and she returned to her grandmother for a few weeks. Ellise was planning to go on holiday as well, so this was ideal and gave me time to regroup and find accommodation more suitable for us all.

I decided to go to Penwortham for a break and to visit Jeff, our now director. We had rekindled our friendship online. The last time I'd seen him was in Edinburgh, before I left to move back to the USA in 1997. So I was excited to see him and I thought I'd use the time to reflect and work things out while Ellise was on holiday.

Sadly, in that time, I received a call to tell me Ellise committed suicide, she was only 13. After the news of Ellise's suicide, I just couldn't return to my home in Essex, it was too heartbreaking. So I decided to leave. We needed a fresh start. Although I had a home, life and job in Essex, I just left it all as it was. I couldn't bare to return and face the memories and sadness. I was now in South Ribblesdale, and broken to pieces, with no home that I felt I could return to without Ellise there. I knew no one here in South Ribblesdale, but we felt safe and supported. Jeff's family welcomed myself and Zion with open arms and invited us to stay until we could get better. Even with this kindness and amazing support there was not enough room for us all.

I still needed to find myself again and Zion and I needed our own home. I was in a state of grief and confusion. So every day I took Zion to primary school, now in Penwortham and went for a walk to cry and ask the earth/universe to take away my pain, find me peace, a home, friends and love.

There was a particular tree, a big beautiful strong Oak tree that called to me. I would sit under it everyday and meditate and make my plea, day after day, month after month. I had no space of my own to let it out and the tree was that space. I stayed with Jeff and his father and didn't want to burden them with my tears. So the tree was my support and my counsellor. I looked for homes all across Lancashire, bidding position 2 for Chorley, bidding position 3 for Leyland, position 27, Bamber bridge, and so on and so on. Month after month after month. Had I made a mistake choosing to leave Essex? Everything in my gut told me, no, stay here. I kept sitting under my tree daily wishing, making requests and trying to get my head in order. I became desperate, eventually telling the wise oak " Please, please Help, I'll take anything, I just

need to start our life, Zion needs a place on his own" all the time sitting in the seat my bum had now carved in between the roots of this majestic Oak Tree.

Weeks went by and I finally got a possible offer. It was a house in Penwortham, a place called Alderfield!! I wasn't sure where it was. I went back to my tree and sat and wished like I've never wished before. I went home and I received the message. We would like to offer you a home in Alderfield. Woohoooo!!! I almost cried with joy. So, I drove to the area and loved it!!!

As I got myself settled in, I went back to Essex to empty my old home and then returned to unpack. I then went to check out my new area. To my overwhelming joy and surprise there she was, the wise old oak tree who I'd wished under week after week!! My beautiful friend that I'd been sitting under that supported me literally and spiritually. She was only three minutes walk away from my new home, and I'm not exaggerating, actually three minutes!!! I couldn't believe it!! After over 80 places I had bid for, all the places and all the areas in Lancashire. The first and only home I was offered was right by my tree!! I feel the tree had listened and we connected and she kept me within her care circle. Since moving here I have been drawn to care for the area and the community now surrounding myself and the wise old oak tree, who I have now aptly named 'The Wishing Tree'.

Again, all was brilliant, Zion was making his first new friends. Then covid hit... We had a garden, but I didn't know what to do with it so Zion and I began by planting a tree for Ellise, then sunflowers for my mum, and roses for Lorna. I began to realise that every time I planted our grief got easier. I had continued to contact Barbra, who was an avid gardener for advice, her often laughing at my lack of knowledge. It made her happy to know I had found nature and we continued to comfort each other and share memories over the phone. Sadly another blow came and Barbra (Ellises nan) had lost her battle with cancer. So, I was broken again, I went out in the garden and started to dig away the pain, Jeff came over and joined me to help, by the time I even noticed a few weeks had gone past and we had created two small ponds, with a small stream!! I didn't realise at the time but doing this has got me through the grief of losing Barbra. Jeff then hand made a bridge for the stream and it is now dedicated to her.

Every time I felt sad I planted something new. I looked up one day from what was just a grass lawn and realised all the beauty that I'd created from such sadness. I was truly comforted. I then realised how much mother earth had supported me through all of my grief. There is one quote that I'd like to share that is now the driving force for all that I want to achieve

'Grief is merely love with no place to go'

This was so powerful and true and exactly what I was doing. I was putting all the love I have for all of those I had lost, 'my angel's', into nature. But there is so much love, I have so many more places I can place it!! So, I volunteered in lots of places, 'Let's Grow Preston', 'Lancashire Wildlife Trust', 'Brinscall Hall', and 'Outdoors for All'. I began studying with 'Lancashire Adult learning' my level 1 in Horticulture. Through this I found a group of beautiful friends who were

all challenged by different mental and physical health issues in their lives. We all used nature to heal and wanted to do more. So we helped each other and the community, but we needed a base. But where? Hmm.

So again, sitting at the wishing tree, just thinking, telling her in my mind what I have been up to and happy to just be with her(ahh sweet beautiful tree). I reflected on how, after desperately trying to find continuing support for Ellise before her tragic death, she was lost in the system. She was left with nothing stable, and nowhere to go for ongoing support from services, where she could just feel safe and surrounded by a team of support. I then thought to myself " I CAN rectify this. I can honour her memory and that of all my angels who have guided me (and of course the wishing tree) by creating a safe nature based therapeutic community where people can have stability and feel accepted even in their darkest of moments. The earth and nature have healed me, why wouldn't it do the same for them?"

So, two days later I explained to my neighbour about our team of friends and she told me about a Community Allotment in Alderfield in desperate need of help. She liked our ideas and offered me the keys!!! (again three mins walk from my house and the wishing tree, weird huh?!). It needed a lot of work and had been neglected for 6 years. So the team and I set to work. We finally had a base to meet and we could be a tribe of inspiration for each other and the community.

It doesn't end there, oh no no! After my experience with the Wishing tree, I have seen it as my duty to repay her, so I always see myself as a guardian of the area now around me and all that surrounds the Wishing Tree. She sure has kept me busy! Whilst walking back one day from visiting and reflecting with my friend the wise old wishing tree. I spotted a disused football pitch, on my estate, all overgrown (AGAIN!!, this time two minutes walk from the wishing tree!) OK now it's really strange. I thought to myself " what a waste that can be used for something amazing for the community. Then it hit me.. Poly tunnels!! We could use this area to create plants and a hub of support, education and enrichment through nature for the community! And so the idea for 'Guardians of Nature' was Born!!

My hope is that 'Guardians of Nature' will be a continuing and ongoing support hub for the community and be a place where people can come and just feel welcome and support each other, both on site and in outreach work within the community. In our fast paced digital world our mental health as humans is unwell at best and I believe wholeheartedly that the cure is right on our doorsteps, in nature and our communities.

Every day, I am amazed and humbled by what is being gifted to me by nature. I lovingly call it 'angels and fairies moments'. There is no other explanation for it, I can not argue with it, even though at times it may be hard, I fully trust in nature's guidance. How can I not ? ...Have you read my story so far ?

Ok, you're probably thinking, this story sounds crazy...angels and wishing trees, whaaat?!

Well, I'm as amazed as you!! One thing I do know now, through all of my experiences, is one thing. This is now my calling, I'm going forward from the roots up (hehe, get it)

I'm going to continue this work and be a 'Guardian of Nature' as long as I'm alive. I hope others will too. Just take a minute to stop, quiet yourself and listen to nature, feel the earth and you will hear it too.

And the rest of the story well.. To that's be continued 🌻.....

One Love,

Alfa L Ray

Founder of 'Guardians of Nature'