

## Our Story – Renaissance Rocking Horses – Chris Woolcock & Viktoria Darabi

By Viktoria Darabi

Little did I imagine eleven years ago I when I was stressed out strategic marketer for the largest private hospital in the state that I would be earning a living making and marketing wooden rocking horses with a new partner, new daughter and new house.

I had enjoyed nearly 3 years of managing events large and small for Specialists, GP's, doctor's secretaries and staff. However, the job was demanding more and more hours and I had become a single mum with a 4 year old son and there were 25 year olds with the qualifications and no children who would happily put in the hours. So I set about to find my replacement from among those ranks.

About this time I was moaning to a contractor work colleague that there were no intelligent, kind, single men about and he gave me the number of rocking horse maker chap he had known for several years whom he met through doing regional shows.

I called the number, left a message and Chris called me back. We talked and talked. We talked every night for about 3 months between Ross in Tasmania and Sydney while he was in the process of moving himself to Sydney. As the cliché goes, "it was as if we had known each other forever".

Chris left Tasmania with only his 8 year old Nissan Urvan, tools, machinery, clothes he could fit in the van and his indefatigable talent. He rented a workshop in Box Hill and I was living in Quakers Hill. We had exchanged photos, but still not met.

I had sent Chris my resume early in the piece and we laugh about it now - was I applying for a job? In a manner of speaking I guess it ended up that way. At the time I saw it as the most efficient way to communicate my background, education and life experience without wasting time on the phone about it. The resume must have done the trick because the wooing was definitely more intense afterwards.

You're So Not What I Wanted!

When we finally did meet some three months after that first phone call I was confronted by a 49 year old man with a greying 30 cm beard, equally long hair in a pony tail, lumber jack shirt, battered Akubra hat and moleskins tucked in knee length leather boots.

He was and still is wildly intelligent, constantly curious about the world with a voracious appetite for world affairs, reading at any spare moments. He loves animals and children and has a secret affinity with them and they with him.

In the weeks after, and as I got to know him better I would say to him, "You're so not what I wanted!" and be thinking "but so what I needed!" Then I did something completely out of character—I asked him to move in to my little duplex in Quakers Hill with me and my four year old son. Over a decade later and we are still together.

I gradually trimmed Chris's feral hair and beard until it was a neat naval style. He still has that kindly Santa thing going on even when I colour his beard for shows and TV appearances. It didn't occur to me to colour his beard until he kept getting mistaken for my father. I would get weeks of mileage from that.

Chris found a 5 acre property with busy Windsor Road frontage near to Windsor which he felt had real estate growth potential for the future. It had two, fifty year old houses, a shed and a huge pool. The following April we moved there, lived in the smaller house, rented out the larger house and made rocking horses in the shed.

By the June of that same year we were making enough money from the rocking horses for me to risk resigning my job at the hospital. In the space of a week I had surrendered my title, my hard won salary and sold my BMW. After 6 weeks of adrenalin withdrawal migraines and a small identity crisis, I set out to make and market rocking horses with my mountain man.

### A Millenium Baby

After many years thinking I would never have another child, we had a beautiful daughter in October 2000. (Chris has fathered 5 but raised 8 children altogether). She turned out to be a copy book baby and child, who today loves all the things her parents do—antiques, rocking horses, porcelain dolls, bears, farm animals, all things French, people and making things.

That first Christmas 2000 in the workshop, she was 3 months old in a front baby pouch on my chest asleep while I was putting the finishing touches on Christmas rocking horse orders. To her the workshop is just another room of the house.

I was 12 weeks pregnant with her when we did our first 16 day Royal Easter Show. She was 6 months when we did our second Royal Show and 18 months when we did our last. She did the Adelaide Royal Show with us at 3 and has done many Timber and Working with Wood Shows with us.

To say she is socially adept and a born marketer would be an understatement. At a Timber Show in Canberra when she was about four, she confidently informed the Renapur Leather Dressing demonstrator polishing her shoes that they "could make a rocking horse at our place and stay at our B & B and have flat or scrambled eggs, egg in the shell or omelette for breakfast." It's good to know that when my marketing mouth gets tired she can step into the breach.

### The Good Old Bad Days

In the good old bad days after we moved to Windsor Road we had some tough times. We had road works if not directly in front of us, either south or north of us the whole 5 years we lived there. While Chris would sit out right by the road whittling Noah's ark animals and sell a complete Noah's ark for \$200 which should have fetched \$800, I intermittently taught marketing at Hawkesbury Community College for a little extra income.

In those days the horses were made from truck loads of undressed scrap box timber from the box factory in Wilberforce. Now we buy slings of first grade plantation grown NZ Radiata Pine from the timber merchant all milled to the correct sizes and kiln dried.

Also from Wilberforce were cow tails from the abattoirs which Chris would collect and tan himself. It was a filthy job and he did not eat at all on Wednesday which was tail pick up and tanning day. Now we import prepared horse tail hair from China and buy cow tails from one of the last remaining hand tanners in Australia.

Our original stirrups were hand bent from aluminium bar and closed with pop rivets. They have been replaced by brass plated stirrups, brackets and bits. The swing irons which Chris used to cut, bend and thread himself are now done piece work by a retired engineer.

The nail on pad saddles responsible for my weak wrists have been replaced by imported miniature English riding saddles made in two colours. A local hobbyist saddler does custom saddles for antique horse restorations as required.

If Only We'd Met 20 Years Ago...

We often reflect on what we might have achieved by now had we met 20 years ago. We know this is a silly thing to do because without our previous life trials we would, in all probability, not have been attracted to each other.

One of the occupational hazards of being partner rocking horse makers is that we each have very defined roles for ourselves and go about our business for most of the year happily, but come Christmas time it becomes "crazy-busy" and we only see each other at meal times. We have a sense of being two ships constantly passing in the night and never meeting up. Even though we work at home together every day, sometimes I say to him "I miss you", and he says, "Don't worry I'll be back soon". Soon turns out to be about Valentines Day. That is about the time he puts back on the 10 kilos he lost carving into Christmas, catches up on his sleep and can string full sentences together without snapping our heads off.

In June 2004 when the business moved to Pitt Town Road, 2 km around the corner from the Windsor Road address, Chris immediately built a teaching workshop within the 20 x 12 m Colourbond shed and 3-Day Power-Carved Rocking Horse Making Classes commenced in February 2005. Students from as far away as WA, far north QLD and New Zealand have graduated from Rocking Horse Lodge University. On the Sunday students leave beaming with a horse of their own making. These classes are now booked out a year in advance.

There is an French style, antique-bedecked Bed & Breakfast in the Loft of the Homestead, which has been furnished entirely from garage sales, op shops, second hand dealers, auctions and council clean-up day finds and features vintage pieces from childhood and porcelain dolls.

My antique pram collection (dating 1890 to 1970) is shared with the 'Over 50's' and car rally groups that come for an old fashioned morning or afternoon tea tours of the property about 2-3 times per month. They also enjoy visiting the black face Suffolk sheep and assorted ducks, chooks, geese and turkeys to collect eggs.

While this diversity of activity has helped with the seasonality of the business it has also suited the gentle shift created by the baby boomers access to money and leisure time. They are into classes, DIY, cultural exploration and education and our working life is made so much more pleasurable sharing it with appreciative, like-minded individuals like these.

We no longer need or are able to do any major away shows due to the children's schooling and the number of animals that need caring for so we began our own annual Open Weekend at Rocking Horse Lodge. After all, don't they say "If you build it, they will come"?

Our inaugural event in 2007 attracted Iain "Huey" Hewitson and his TV Crew. Huey filmed 11 recipes here on the property and this resulted in our own episode and many TV segments on the show through out 2008. We had about 40 stall holders from the region with the theme "Handmade Homegrown". The timing chosen was the second weekend of October, when classes were over and one could capitalise on pre Christmas rocking horse ordering habits and impulse buying. It also provides another opportunity to promote class bookings for the following year.

And Now...

We still have a few more elements of "the masterplan" to put in place. Plans are in place for the adornment and official launch of the eight metre diameter Victorian Carousel Pavilion, complete with red and white striped tent roof which has been erected on our front lawn. There are six carved carousel horses to complete and a floor mosaic. This will be both a tourist and educational attraction and a lovely spot to have morning and afternoon teas for classes and tour groups, plus an unusual venue for, wedding, child and formal photography and a muse for artists and artisans.

Our dreams and plans are regularly pulled out and rehashed. We love and are passionate about what we do and enjoy the daily challenges of shaping it to suit the changing demands of the market place. If you are happy to work at constantly reinventing yourselves, we can highly recommend the tree change life.

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