

Carolee Carrara proves it's never too late to start

From talented performer to children's book author and illustrator, Carolee Carrara continues to set new goals and milestones.

By **SAMANTHA SIED**
Contributor

Carolee Carrara is no stranger to learning and trying new things. She has demonstrated this throughout her life as a mother, musician, Marilyn Monroe tribute artist, and esthetician. More recently, she became a published children's book author in her 70s.



Carolee is an accomplished singer and performer. For many years she was a Marilyn Monroe tribute artist at hotels in downtown Portland. (Courtesy C. Carrara)

Carrara wants you to know the "sky's the limit" to what you can learn and achieve regardless of age. In her mid-seventies, she taught herself to write and illustrate children's books while at home during quarantine.

"You really can follow your dreams. And these little ideas that you've had, and thought 'I couldn't do that.' Just banish those!" Carrara said "Even if



Photo courtesy Carolee Carrara

Singer and children's books author and illustrator Carolee Carrara in 2020.

you're older, and it seems like a mountain before you. One step at a time will get you there!"

So far, she has self-published six children's books inspired by her Christian faith and life lessons. Her first book, "The Golden Promise" was partially inspired by her granddaughter Kendalyn.

Years ago she saw Kendalyn standing by a bush waving a stick like she was conducting an orchestra. The stick had a flower attached to it with a string. Carrara asked her granddaughter what she was doing and learned she was teaching the bees to fly. She immediately ushered her granddaughter away from the bees, but that moment lingered in her mind.

She liked the idea of a child caring for her human and animal neighbors and a story

formed in her mind. The "Golden Promise" was also inspired by this as well as the bible verse Mark 12:32. She wanted to share the story with other children about love and kindness towards others.

During quarantine, Carrara felt a void in her life since she wasn't able to perform music for an audience. She recalled asking herself: "What am I going to do with my life now that I'm not performing and doing music?" The story kept coming back! "Remember that story you wanted to write? Why don't you write it?"

There were just a few obstacles.

Carrara was not an author and didn't draw or paint beyond casually doodling. She was also a first-time author in her seventies, and not especially tech-oriented.



Three of Carrara's six children's books, all of which are available on amazon.com.

She wrote the rhyming children's story and started to look for an illustrator who could bring her ideas "to life." She learned she simply couldn't afford to hire an artist so she decided to learn how to create her own illustrations.

Through persistence and grit, she learned the craft, wrote, illustrated, and self-published her books. Her husband Romeo commented that over and over through the years, he has witnessed Carolee's persistence, commitment to practice and learning.

"I actually wasn't surprised because, yes, I had seen it in the way she approached her music or music ministry," said Carolee's husband Romeo Carrara. When performing music, she especially enjoys meeting and engaging with members of the audience.

As the other person in the room, as she studied and worked, he often provided feedback about her illustrations and writing. He also helped as she navigated the sometimes complex process of self-publishing through Amazon.

Self-Publishing during COVID-19

Since the books were published during COVID lockdowns, Carrara hasn't yet had many opportunities to

participate in book signings or events. However, reviews and letters from some of the parents and grandparents who bought her books brighten her day. For example, a grandmother wrote a letter mentioning that her grandson regularly asks to have the "The Golden Promise" read to him.

"And that was just a thrill to me," said Carrara, "It was so wonderful because I really didn't know how children were going to respond, I wanted them to be happy and joyful and receive these books in a wonderful way."

She said it was a challenge to learn to use a whimsical story and illustrations to convey the intended message.

Never too late to learn, knowledge is everywhere

Although Carrara took a couple of painting classes in her early twenties, things got in the way and drawing and painting were not part of her life. She set out to learn illustration from the ground up with the help of YouTube tutorials, library books, and many hours of practice.

She wasn't initially satisfied with her early attempts at illustration with colored pencils. After seeing a friend use an iPad app called Procreate,

■ CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

Carolee Carrara

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

she decided to learn that application. Carrara claims not to be tech-savvy, so learning to use an iPad as well as Procreate presented a new set of challenges.

“Well, everything you could possibly need to know is on YouTube!” She exclaimed.

Carrara watched hundreds of tutorial videos on various aspects of drawing, illustration, and using the Procreate app. In addition, she also turned to traditional books.

“You can still get books at the library and you can get online books,” she explained. “It’s just really up to you, what do you want to learn, there’s no excuse, there are resources everywhere.”

Since she is a retiree who began this journey while at home during the quarantine period, she was able to spend hours practicing what she learned. While working on illustrations for “The Golden Promise” she would sometimes create 35 different versions before feeling satisfied.

With practice she became skilled enough to not only complete six books. In addition, another self-published author in Florida even hired her to illustrate a few books.

“I’m getting better, I’m



Carolee applies make-up to actor Danny Glover when he was filming a movie locally. (Photo courtesy B. Carrara)

growing, I can see that I’m learning as an artist and I’m growing,” she said.

Finding beauty and inspiration all around

Throughout much of Carrara’s life, she overcame life’s difficulties through learning, creative expression, and faith.

She grew up in a musical family, her father had Carrara and her two sisters sing with his band. She said she hated it at the time and didn’t grow to love performing until years later.

In her twenties, she would occasionally sing during a night out at a piano bar. At the time she felt uneasy about

performing, but other patrons in the piano bar encouraged her.

Over time, she gained confidence in her voice and enjoyed singing and performing. Her first professional singing job was performing with the Andy Williams Good Time Singers at Disneyland in the late 1960s. She left this group after a national tour and started performing as a solo folk artist in Colorado eventually joining a jazz trio in Portland, Oregon.

Carrara said her confidence grew as she grew into her Christian faith. She performed faith-based events including the “Sing Out For Life” concert in Denver which was

hosted by Pat Boone and featured well-known Christian musicians at the time such as Phil Keaggy, and Annie Herring from 2nd Chapter of Acts.

She described her faith as one of her main sources of creative inspiration and motivation for her books and art as well. The six children’s books draw from Bible verses, personal morals, and life lessons.

As a mother and grandmother, she wanted to support kids and parents during these difficult times. Carrara has a habit of lifelong learning and trying new things. In fact, these qualities led her to performing as a Marilyn Monroe tribute artist.

Becoming Marilyn

Carrara performed as a Marilyn Monroe impersonator in the Portland area for a while in the 1990s. She said she originally got the idea when an Elvis tribute artist approached her at a karaoke event and suggested that she perform as Marilyn. He knew of someone who was interested in hiring a Marilyn Monroe impersonator.

At the time she wasn’t that familiar with Monroe’s films. She watched them all in preparation for the gig and taught herself Monroe’s dance moves, songs, mannerisms,



Carolee singing at a senior center event several years ago. (Photo courtesy Carolee Carrara)

and catchphrases.

She dressed up in the iconic white halter dress from “Seven Year Itch” and a platinum blonde wig. “Elvis” arrived in costume to pick her up and drive her to the gig at a mansion in Portland.

“I had so much fun impersonating Marilyn, but I never took it too seriously,” she explained. “I did learn a lot about her and I learned to care about who she was.”

She performed as Marilyn at a variety of fundraising events, parades, corporate functions, casino shows, and other community events. A seamstress friend of hers carefully recreated some of Monroe’s most iconic

costumes including the navy blue-lined hot pink strapless gown worn during Monroe’s performance of “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend.”

Finding her real-life Romeo and moving forward

One night after a Marilyn Monroe tribute performance, Carrara went out to hear live music with a friend. That night she met her own real-life Romeo. However, unlike in Shakespeare’s tragedy, Carolee and Romeo were both mature adults. They blended their families and the two have been together for nearly thirty years.

■ CONTINUED ON PG 9



Carolee Carrara

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

“Wow, she was just unbelievable!” Romeo Carrara recalled. “I was just talking with her immediately. And when I got the chance to talk with her well, it took a little while to break the ice but we seemed to have a lot in common and we enjoyed each other’s company.”

As they got to know each other, Romeo started to accompany Carolee to her shows acting as driver, bodyguard, and photographer.

He explained. “It was fun and definitely different from



DUO: Carolee and her husband, Romeo, in 2018. They have often performed together. (Photo Carolee Carrara)

Carolee’s books and fine art prints will be available at The Sandy Historical Society Museum — 39345 Pioneer Blvd. Her fine art prints/greeting cards will be available at the Tollgate Inn Bakery at 38100 Highway 26.

Her children’s books include:

- The Golden Promise
- Dani’s Favorite Umbrella
- We Are Beautiful Colors
- There’s A Hamster In My Tuba
- To Crow Or Not To Crow?
- Little Jimmy Lee - Big Or Little

All her books are also available on amazon.com. **HVN**

the usual. Looking back on it — I think doing this allowed me to become more comfortable as a performer too. I later became a co-performer with her — performing music at senior living centers, as well as wineries and cafes.”

They became creative and musical partners which they remain. Romeo also helped Carolee edit her books and figure out Amazon’s self-publishing procedures and software.

Around the time when she performed as Marilyn Monroe, Carolee Carrara also went to

school to train as an esthetician. This opened up a new career working for spas and freelancing as a makeup artist. She even applied makeup for Danny Glover when he was part of a local film project. She used this experience to launch an eCommerce skincare company with Romeo as her partner in business as well as life.

Moving forward

Carolee and Romeo are currently rehearsing, hoping to return to outdoor performances this summer. **HVN**

