

Katrina and a Magical Rug

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Although travel via magic carpet is a familiar notion, most of us are certain they don't exist – that is, unless you're Laura Skansi. Until the summer of 2005, Laura and her family lived in a comfortable one-story home in the Lakeshore District of New Orleans. Since then, one could say that she and her family have experienced a long trip, and it definitely involved a magical rug.

After Hurricane Katrina passed through New Orleans on August 29th, Laura's home had only a bit of roof damage. The real problem was to come the next day, when the levees broke and the flooding started. The Skansi family had evacuated to Baton Rouge with three days of clothing, and like the rest of the world could only watch in shock as the waters covered their neighborhood. At 2 blocks from Lake Pontchartrain and 5 blocks from the breach of the 17th Street Canal levee, their home had one thing in its favor: it's elevated a few feet and not simply sitting on a slab like the rest nearby. That bit of additional height made a difference. When the waters in their street peaked at 4.5 ft, much of the house was spared, but all of the rugs that covered the hardwood floors were soaked with muddy, oily water from the Lake.

Among those rugs was a very special one tucked under Laura's bed: a needlepoint rug she'd stitched for her daughter, Meg. Designed by Joanie Sherman of The Studio, Castle Rug depicts a fantasy land of dragons, castles, unicorns, and princesses – perfect for a little girl's room. Laura started it when she was pregnant and finished it in 1995 when Meg was 18 months old. The rug hung in Meg's room until she outgrew it, and Laura had planned to hang it at Needle Arts Studio, her shop in Metairie, "but I never quite got around to completing the job."

The soonest that any of the Skansis could get back to their house was a week after the flooding, when David, Laura's husband, returned by boat. By that time, much of the water had receded, and he worked furiously to pull wet treasures out of the house and get them on to the lawn, motivated by the need to minimize mold and mildew damage to the floors. It would be six more weeks before Laura could get back to the house. For all of that time, every rug in the house was spread on the lawn – including some large, colorful decorator rugs. When Laura expressed concern about the possibility that they would be stolen, her husband told her "they're so gray with mud they're not visible from the street." And when she finally got back to her house for the first time, she found out he was right.

As the cleanup effort began, the Skansis sent several large rugs to a local cleaner for restoration. One was a complete loss because it absorbed more oil than the rest. Through it all, the needlepoint rug was paramount to Laura: "After all, I stitched it myself for my only child." For many years, her shop has sent needlepoint to the First and Last Stitch in St. Louis for finishing, and her first thought was to call to see if they would take on the challenge of restoring Castle Rug.

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Linda Luker, the finishing manager at First and Last Stitch, was confident they could help and encouraged Laura to send it. When the rug arrived in St. Louis, it was dry and pliable but smelled moldy. Even though it was grimy from the silt that permeated it, the design was visible. The first thing Linda did was remove the backing and cording. “I worked fast taking it apart – I didn’t want to be exposed to it for that long!” Fortunately, the stitching was intact, but the state of the rug made it clear that professional cleaning was needed. So Castle Rug went off to Woodard Cleaning and Restoration Services, a St. Louis firm with 60 years experience restoring rugs and furniture, including needlepoint.

To the team at Woodard, Castle Rug was all in a day’s work. They’d already seen what Katrina had wrought, having supervised some on-site cleanup jobs in New Orleans. Even so, according to plant manager Shawn Wagner, “any needlepoint rug can be tricky”, requiring careful testing to determine the best cleaning strategy. If colors in the painted design or the dyes in the yarns run when dampened, the rug dry must be dry cleaned using mineral spirits. If both are stable, as they were in Castle Rug, a full wet cleaning is possible. In this process a mixture of detergent and water is forced under pressure into the rug, agitated, and then sucked back out. Woodard crews use only neutral pH detergents – without chemical additives – and generally only Orvus[®]. After the initial cleaning, an antimicrobial spray that kills on contact was applied and Castle Rug was dried quickly under moving air. Upon its return, the First and Last Stitch crew reblocked the rug, applied sizing to the back of the canvas, and finished it with a backing and a hand-rolled cord edge. The effort paid off, as Linda noted that “the rug came back to life miraculously well – it blocked square, and the colors were bright”.

Linda and Shawn have the same advice to anyone with damaged rugs, pillows, and other works of needle art: Don’t give up on them, and don’t try to do the restoration yourself. It’s best to have a professional look at it as soon as possible, because you don’t know what pitfalls may await you. Linda advises that “owners should take their treasures to a reputable professional for evaluation – one who will give you an honest assessment of the outcome and who wouldn’t proceed unless they’d be happy with the finished product themselves”. According to Shawn, any particular rug has three types of value: monetary value, antique value, and sentimental value. Consequently, giving any client an assessment is complicated. The damage in a piece may be so extensive that it cannot be restored to a pleasing appearance, but the sentimental value may be so great that the owner will want to restore it anyway. Similarly, it may be possible to restore a heavily damaged object but at a cost for labor, time and materials that greatly exceeds its value. “We try to be as honest as possible and to set expectations appropriately with respect to cost and final results. At that point, only the customer can determine whether a restoration is worth it or not.”

While Castle Rug was undergoing its forced extreme makeover, Laura and her family worked to get their lives back to normal. They bought a home in a nearby golf community to the south, on the other side of the Mississippi. A shortage of contractors meant that her husband and his father worked around the clock for four months to renovate the Skansi home. Although Laura’s sister is currently living in the house – her house was completely destroyed and is undergoing reconstruction – they have every intention of returning to it. Laura was born in New Orleans, grew up in the Lakeshore District, and has lived there her entire life. “I’m a city girl” she says. “If you grew up here, the city and its culture run in your blood.”

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The restored Castle Rug has returned to New Orleans, where it lies on the floor of Needle Arts Studio. Visitors to the shop love the rug, especially when Laura flips over the corner to show them the monogram: “LLS 1995 Katrina 2005”, commemorating both the date when she finished it, and the year it was damaged and restored. Although the highlights in the yarn don’t sparkle quite the way they used to, Laura says it looks great and “I’m thrilled to have saved it at all.”

In a bit of luck resulting from the area’s quirky topology, the shop wasn’t touched at all by the storm or the flooding, despite being in a building that Laura describes as rickety. “We thought it wouldn’t survive a 20-mile an hour wind, let alone a hurricane”. Since reopening on November 1, the shop has been very busy. The diminished cultural life of post-Katrina New Orleans has residents seeking alternative forms of entertainment. “Customers tell us they need something to do; something that’s therapeutic.” Beleaguered stitchers have made it impossible for the shop to keep New Orleans-themed canvases in stock. “Anything New Orleans sells” according to Laura, which is consistent with the spirit of a populace that loves its metropolis.

So even though the Skansis face a bit more travel before they arrive back home, a rug bearing fantastical themes has now legitimately earned its magic – representing the recovery and rebirth of not only a family, but also a city displaced.

About the author: Denise has served on the Board of the St. Louis Gateway Chapter ANG as Newsletter Editor, Program Director, and President. In 2002, she chaired the ANG Workshop By Mail program, and in 2003-2004 served as the ANG Director for Educational Services. She is a contributor to the 2002 ANG Chapter Handbook, and the 2003 and 2005 ANG Chapter Project Books. She welcomes your comments and questions at denise@beusen.net.