

Shari Caudron on her social formula for a wired world: Passion + people = community

ISSUES &

BOOK EXCERPT

VIRTUAL WORLDS, REAL CONNECTIONS

SHARI CAUDRON

There's a lot of talk these days about the sad, socially isolated state of North Americans. We're a lonely lot, studies claim. Our communities are dying. Relationships are on the brink. Sure, we've got plenty of connections on the Internet. But these aren't *real* relationships, at least not according to the researchers. Real relationships involve people who listen and understand and support and truly know one another. Real relationships are not a list of names in a MySpace address book.

But I don't want to talk about loneliness or social isolation or the death of community. At least not yet. Instead, I want to talk about Barbie collecting.

Barbie collecting is not the kind of thing you'd normally read about in the op-ed pages. It's not the kind of thing I normally write about either.

But bear with me.

Three years ago, as part of research for a book about passionate fanatics called *Who Are You People?*, I ventured in a Barbie convention. I didn't go to the Barbie convention because I'm a Barbie kind of gal. In fact, I never even played with the doll as a child — I was more a build-a-fort-and-go-pretend-camping kind of girl, as opposed to a dress-your-doll-and-go-pretend shopping kind of girl.

I couldn't possibly understand why people liked, no, loved Barbie. And that's exactly why I went. See, I've never had a fanatical passion that grabbed my attention one day and didn't let go. Because of this, I was curious about people who did. People like Barbie collectors.

I walked into the convention and saw lots of cheerful women dressed in pink, with little Barbie dolls sticking out of their purses. I cruised the sales floor, where I learned the difference between a Bubble Cut and a Twist 'n Turn. I attended workshops on costume design and "limb reconstruction." And I was — I admit — secretly amused by the whole pink Barbie world.

And then I met Judy Stegner, a 43-year-old collector and single mother from Fort Worth, Texas.

Judy and I sat down and she began to tell me, her voice a deep Texas twang, how she met her Barbie friends.

"Well ... it was Thanksgiving night in 1998 and my son Justin, who knew I loved Barbie, said to me, 'Mom, there's probably a chat room where you can talk with other Barbie people.' I looked at him like he was crazy. I mean, I didn't know anything about the Internet or chat rooms. Justin had to do everything. He found a site, logged me on, even gave me my screen name. I was online that night talking to Barbie people until two in the morning." Judy laughed and rolled her eyes.

"But you know," she said, "the Barbie collectors I've met on the Internet are great people. I mean, I never could have made it without 'em."

I put down the bottle of water I'd been holding. "What do you mean," I asked, "that you couldn't have made it without them?"

Judy exhaled. "Well," she said, "maybe you heard about this. In September, 1999, there was a shooting at Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth in which several kids were killed."

I told her I vaguely recalled a story about a man who'd entered a church during a youth rally and randomly started shooting.

"That's the one," she said. "He



ILLUSTRATION BY LEIF PENG

From doll collectors to pigeon racers, the Web is hatching millions of niche social networks. As Shari Caudron reports, sometimes your best friends are the ones you meet online

murdered seven people that day, including my son Justin." Judy's brown eyes grew pink with tears. "He was my only child."

I looked at Judy, stunned by the information. The whirl of noise and activity around us came to abrupt stop. I smelled coffee from a nearby coffee cart. I noticed the glossy deep green leaves of a potted plant. Through the window behind Judy, I could see silent business people, their bodies bent forward, hurrying to work or meetings or other very important places. How could this woman, how could anybody, go on with the routine of life after something like this?

Judy continued. "Well, my Texas friends gradually dropped out of sight after my son was killed. I mean, I don't blame 'em. They didn't know what to say. But my Barbie friends ... they called or wrote me every day. They sent me money. They sent care packages. They helped raise thousands of dollars for a tuition assistance fund in Justin's name. They also contacted Mattel. Can you believe that? They contacted Mattel and the company sent me a special collectible Barbie and a handwritten note the first Christmas after Justin died. My Barbie friends even had a special Angel doll made for me." Judy paused to raise her glasses and wipe away tears. "I'm so blessed. This is the closest circle of friends I've ever had."

I couldn't think of a single, comforting thing to say and felt ashamed because of it.

Suddenly, Judy jumped to her feet. "Let me show you something," she said.

I sensed Judy Stegner was used to putting other people at ease over her grief.

She grabbed her convention tote bag, pulled out a quilt and unfolded it on the bench in front of us. The quilt, made to honor her son's life, featured 18 hand-

For the next three years, I continued my investigation into fanatical passion. I spent time with ice fishers, Star Wars fans, pigeon racers, and die-hard fans of Josh Groban (who call themselves the Grobanites and encourage each other to Josh on!) Throughout my travels, some version of the find-a-passion, find-a-community story was told

ties than meets the eye. It's a phenomenon I sum up with the equation: Passion + people = community.

Get people together around a common interest. Allow them to talk about that interest without fear of ridicule, and something transcendent occurs. The interest expands. Relationships deepen. And soon you've got nurtur-

interests. And there are simply too many of these potential interests — collecting action heroes, pimping old Fords, squeezing the accordion, etc. — for any statistical survey to track.

So why the persistently negative reports about social isolation? Because I believe we're in transition, a place where many older people (the same folks most likely to be at home and responding to social surveys) are still trying to get comfortable with online expression. The more comfortable they get using the Internet as a place to search for like-minded souls, the more comfortable they'll become with the friendships they foster online, and the more likely they'll be to venture out into mutually supportive in-person communities.

Ever since Alex de Tocqueville journeyed across the continent in the early 1800s, North America has been known as a place for joiners. And we're still joining together — but in newer, more colorful and quirky ways.

Socially isolated? Not hardly. *National Post* shari@shari-caudron.com

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JUDY STEGNER, 43, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

sewn panels created by her Internet Barbie friends in California, Texas, Oklahoma, Michigan, Virginia, New York and Australia. The back of the quilt was covered in a white flannel swath of vintage fabric covered with Barbie silhouettes.

Judy bent over and ran her hand along the soft material. "I can't imagine how much that cost," she said. "That's practically antique."

I left Judy Stegner and wandered through the Barbie convention with a new, unexpected perspective. The passion for Barbie dolls may appear trivial to outsiders, but it seemed that the community that had formed around those dolls was anything but.

over and over again.

For example, I met a young autistic man who'd never had social relationships of any sort until he found "furries," people who shared his interest in animal art.

I met adult Lego users who used to pursue their hobby alone in basement rooms, who now happily meet in person with other adult Lego users — or, as they explained, with people who "get them."

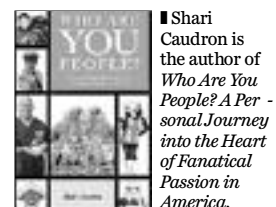
I met fans of the decades-old *Andy Griffith Show* who — after contacting each other on the Internet — now meet regularly in person to watch reruns in their own living rooms.

Make of that what you will. But I began to sense to there's more to these quirky communi-

ing communities wherein autistic people are finding their voice and doll collectors are making quilts to help each other survive hard times.

Which brings me back to all those studies on social isolation, like Robert Putnam's famous 2000 book *Bowling alone*. The time I spent traveling the country with passionate fanatics has led me to conclude that community is not on the decline, nor are we more socially isolated than ever.

Sure, Rotary Clubs and bowling leagues and homeowners' associations may be losing members, but it's because people are finding other, more personally rewarding ways to find community, and that is by finding others who share their niche



Shari Caudron is the author of *Who Are You People? A Personal Journey into the Heart of Fanatical Passion in America*. (2006, Barricade Books). Visit her website at www.whoareyoupeople.com.