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On top of the world

Liz Dodson, at age 90, is a one-woman franchise with a thriving art career, a rich family life and a zest for world travel.

SUSAN SCHAEFER **FEBRUARY 25,**

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Artist Liz Dodson poses in her Minneapolis condo with views of downtown Minneapolis and the Mississippi River. Photo by Tracy Walsh

Many mornings you'll find Liz Dodson in the gym of her Riverview Tower condo in Minneapolis, poring over *The New York Times*, pedaling a stationary bike for a half-hour spin.

“I walk regularly and try to ward off knee surgery with my 30-minute physical fitness routines,” she confesses, a twinkle in her corn silk blue eyes.

At age 90, Dodson isn’t just regal, stunning and fit. She’s a one-woman franchise — known equally for her interdisciplinary body of artwork and arts leadership, her extensive global travels and residencies, and her attentiveness to her four sons and large extended family.

Her elevated condo’s view over the city and the Mississippi River’s St. Anthony Falls parallels her exceptionally urban, urbane and high-flying life. A globetrotter currently on her second around-the-world tour, she also teaches a wildly popular weekly arts-appreciation course. With a sterling reputation for arts leadership, she was just appointed VP of an international arts organization.

Currently planning her next major exhibition in China in 2021, she’s staged more than 20 major exhibits since 1999 (the year she turned 69). And, oh yes, she’s enjoying a budding romance.

This must be a highly motivated millennial, right?



When Liz Dodson and her brother, James, were young children, their father told exciting stories of his travels in the Amazon rainforest, which later inspired Liz's love of globetrotting.

World wanderer

And to celebrate her strong health, good fortune and 90th year on earth, Dodson isn't putting up her feet in reflection. No, in fact, during the first third of 2020, she'll commemorate the milestone with a 119-day Viking World Wonders cruise. (She departed from Los Angeles on Jan. 4 and will arrive in London on May 2.)

She had originally planned to host her sons, Mark, Scott, Bob and Jim, for a month each on-board the voyage, which includes 80 shore excursions. Scott, however, had to back out for his own upcoming wedding. No worries, though: Three are still going and Dodson's current male companion decided to accompany her for the entire journey, booking the stateroom next to hers.

The ever-youthful Dodson gleefully explains that her beau, Rob, whom she recently met online, has planned a fantastic evening at the Sydney Opera House for her actual birthday in February with two of her sons joining for a special birthday dinner.

Surely, a trip like this seems hard to top, but Dodson's actually done that. Yes, she's already traveled around the world (more on that later). Attributing her joy of the journey to the migrations of her family of origin, Dodson's very DNA could stand for "Destination: Next Adventure!"

While her maternal grandfather, James Higgins, emigrated from County Cork Ireland during the time of the Irish famine, it seems that the tale of her father, Arthur Wolfram Isca, is the real spark for Dodson's own wanderlust.

"My father left Germany when he was 14 years old to avoid going into the German army, taking a train to France, then on to England," she explains.

His father had owned a Berlin theater newspaper and his mother had been a theater dress-maker, so he was able to get a job traveling to various cities as a theater prop boy. After he arrived at Liverpool, her father boarded a tall ship where he was hired as a cook's assistant, sailing back and forth from Liverpool to the Amazon rainforest. Next, he worked on a ship going up the Amazon River, marking mahogany and ebony trees for cutting in the Brazilian

rainforests. (Maybe not environmentally friendly by today's standards, but it was acceptable back then.)

When Dodson and her brother, James, were young children, their father told exciting stories of the enormous anaconda snakes and headhunters he had encountered in the jungle.

“These stories — and the fact that my mother also loved to travel — have had a great bearing on my love to travel,” Dodson says.



Liz Dodson displays some of her work as part of the Art Day in Alice during her time in South Africa. Dodson co-directed the event, which brought together deeply segregated black and white communities in the early 1980s.

Wife and mother

Dodson has been no less a pioneer in her personal and professional life.

She grew up in South Minneapolis near Lake Harriet and, like many of her peers, she mar-

ried young, at age 20, and had four children, “an average number during the ’50s.”

However, unlike most young women of her era, Dodson had recently graduated from Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), in a time when women weren’t that much of a fixture in universities, let alone at art schools. By then she had already attended evening classes at the University of Minnesota and had worked as a freelance fashion illustrator.

After the birth of her first child, however, she adopted a more traditional role.

“I became a stay-at-home mom until my four sons all started kindergarten,” she explains.

Still, during Christmastimes she was able to get babysitters and continue with her fashion illustration in downtown Minneapolis at Powers Department Store.

As was typical in the 1950s, her husband didn’t help very much with taking care of the children. “In fact, he didn’t hold the babies until they were 1 year old, and he didn’t do any of the housework,” she adds. So, when she wanted to attend university classes, Dodson had to fit it in strategically “so that I didn’t neglect my traditional role.”

Yet, she managed to graduate with a master’s degree in art education and began teaching art at Lincoln High School in Bloomington, where her children attended. When her husband’s job as vice president of World Toy Company took him to Hong Kong — for half the year, six weeks at a time — “I was an art teacher and also Supermom, doing it all.”

They divorced when she was 49, once the boys were all out of high school.



Artist Liz Dodson's elevated condo view over the city of Minneapolis and the Mississippi River parallels her urban, urbane and high-flying life. Photo by Tracy Walsh

The journey continues

In 1980, Dodson met her second husband, Ray Monroe Dodson, in — of all places — the hot tub in her condo's gym.

Their relationship became a storybook tale for other longstanding Riverview Tower residents. "Liz captivated Ray and vice versa," quips a close friend. "They were a perfect fit."

As Dodson tells it: "Our first date was lunch at The Lexington restaurant, and then we toured the Minneapolis Institute of Art where — in front of *Springtime of Life*, the 1871 painting by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot — Ray held my hand."

Mr. Dodson, a scholar who taught organic chemistry at the University of Minnesota, was a scientist with many patents to his name. The two married in 1982 at the Unitarian Unity Church in St. Paul and traveled to San Francisco for their honeymoon.

More travel was already in the cards. A year later came their first global adventure. She and Ray went to live in a little town named Alice, part of the black homeland in South Africa, for two years. Always plying her artistic soul, Dodson brought her creative sensibilities to her time there.

One of the most memorable days in her life was as co-director for the Art Day in Alice. It was the time of deep segregation, and the white Africans who lived there typically prohibited black Africans from eating in the clubhouse. But on this special day, they were invited to join in the food and festival activities.

Elementary and high school children opened an art exhibition. College students wrote and put on a play. The city's mayor cut a ribbon before the parade and planted a tree.

“There were performances of traditional Zulu and break dancers, and many performances by African bands, choirs and popular music,” she remembers. “It was a beautiful coming-together festival that drew both whites and blacks together. I felt so delighted — after all the planning — that it went so well and was so rewarding, meaningful, fun and amazing. It still ranks as one of the best days of my life.”

And that's saying something. Her time in South Africa included visiting several game parks, including the famous Kruger National Park, culminating with a spectacular trip around the world, with visits to 26 countries in 14 months.

“After 33 event-filled years,” she says, “Ray died at age 95.”

Dodson remains close with her stepchildren and their families.



Even Liz Dodson's condo bedroom includes captivating works of art, such as this woodblock headboard by her son, Jim Brenner.
Photo by Tracy Walsh

Creator, curator, collaborator

Dodson's age hasn't slowed her down. She continues to enjoy an active career and solid international reputation as a professional artist.

“I seek to explore the passageways we travel in life,” reads her artist statement. “I see the world through the blend of art, politics, nature and science, and strive to emphasize the theme of water, climate change and art for social change.”

Breathing life into that claim, Dodson is most proud of her collaborative creative sculpture/video installations with her youngest son, Jim Brenner. The themes of their work typically center on water, sustainability and climate change.

Since 1999, they’ve done more than 20 installations, starting in Chicago, then moving on to many other cities, including three recently in China.

In 2000, Dodson staged a second major collaboration with her son titled *2000 Elements*, a prestigious juried show in New York that involved stiff competition to get a spot.

“We had long phone discussions about the type and details of this installation, which finally focused on the primal elements of earth, air, fire and water,” she explains.

Dodson recounts a moment at the show’s opening that is the embodiment of her motherly fulfilment: “Some of my artist colleges were gathered around our installation. One of them asked my son, ‘Well, Jim, tell us: How does it feel to be collaborating in an exhibition with your mother?’ Jim answered, ‘It is my honor.’ I was so moved by his reply, I’ve never forgotten that proud-mother moment.”



Liz Dodson poses with her son, Jim Brenner, at Edison High School in Northeast Minneapolis in front of RiverFirst, one of his many publically commissioned sculptures.

Staying with it

More recently, Dodson has enjoyed working as art director with Jim's son, her grandson James Jr.

"I have directed some of his drone video work," she boasts. James Jr. also has composed music for her videos and updated her art-centered website LizDodson.com.

Dodson's service to the art community is also legendary. She's belonged to and served in leadership roles for several art organizations over the years.

In her early days, Dodson was a member of [WARM, Women Artists Resources of Minnesota](#), showing her work in many exhibitions. Starting in the 1980s, she joined the [Women's Caucus for Art \(WCA\)](#), attending and taking her first video camera to the World Conference of Women in Beijing, China. She served on WCA's national board for a decade, developing friendships with women artists from all over the country.

She curated WCA new media video shorts exhibitions in Atlanta, Seattle, New York and L.A. In 2004, Dodson and her colleague, Jeanne Philipp, co-presented a College Art Association conference session *Negotiation Collaboration in Aesthetics and Social Change* in Seattle.

Dodson received Puffin Grants for her video artwork in 2004 and 2009. Outcomes from those grants included more curated exhibitions — *A Place at the Table* shows in Chicago in 2007 and with the Michigan WCA Chapter in Ann Arbor in 2008.

Later Dodson joined the regional art committee board of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, co-coordinating two large art exhibitions, *Women and Water Rights* in 2010, and *The Women and Money Project* in 2016. The latter exhibit — featured at U of M's Katherine E. Nash Gallery — garnered national attention.

Dodson joined the International Association of Female Artists as a vice president and was featured on their website in November 2019. She's planning an IAFA exhibition in China in 2021, if government negotiations permit.

During a recent Osher Lifelong Learning *Meet the Art Director* class that Dodson co-teaches

with her friend and neighbor, Kay Joseph, Dodson was able to show off her son Jim's North-east Minneapolis studio and work. She's listed first on his website's collaborators page in front of the Chicago Public Art Group and others.

"Being able to work with my mother is an incredible privilege," Brenner says. "She's taught me not only how to be a more creative artist, but how to be a better person."

This obvious mother-son affinity and affection for each other encapsulate the life of this incredible woman — family, art, service.

Susan Schaefer is a Minneapolis-based freelance communications consultant, writer and photographer who can be reached at insights@lifeintrans.com.

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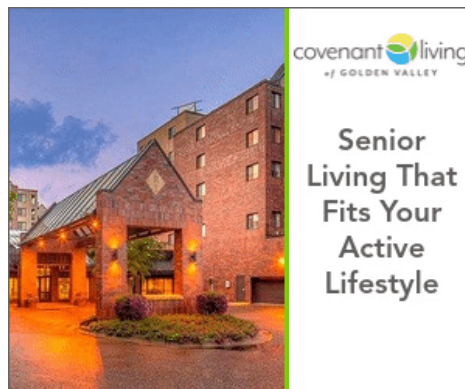
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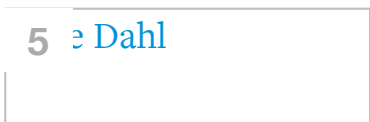
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