

the Plush Life

by Beth St. Lawrence
as seen in *Westside Magazine*



Toy Designer Phebe Phillips

Frogs and cats and puppy dog tails... That's what Phebe Phillips' collection is made of. Not to mention bears, mice, elephants and bunnies. For those who haven't heard of Phebe Phillips, we aren't talking about live animals but the take-home kind with fancy outfits, jewelry and all the whimsy of a storybook tale. Children and parents have been collecting and enjoying these adorable plush toys for nearly half a century. And, yes. As the tag on all of her creations proclaims, there really is a Phebe.

The designer grew up in Gilmer, Texas, just 115 miles east of Dallas. As an only child, Phebe was lavished with love, attention and a special stuffed rabbit. It was given to her at age 4 on Easter Sunday, and she ever-so-aptly named him "Bunny," after her favorite character on the television show "Captain Kangaroo." To this day Bunny sits in Phebe's office to serve as a reminder of what was and what was to come.

She attended Southern Methodist University and graduated in 1981 with a degree in film and journalism. After a short stint with the NBC affiliate in Dallas, she decided the doldrums of hard-news reporting were not for her. It was at this time that Phebe conjured up the idea to design her own stuffed animals. Her line includes beautifully created and embellished characters with personality and great attention to detail. But she does admit to having a favorite. "All of my characters are designed with a human form for the intent of lending a subconscious attraction to become a child's best friend. For me, 'Dancing Rabbit Tutulina Rose' is quintessential Phebe. She is an elegant toy that is well-finished. She is large enough to be a grand room piece and still fully playable," she said. The larger Phebe Phillips plush toys have elastic straps on the bottom of their feet so that children can slip their own feet underneath and actually dance with the animals.

Another trait that makes each Phebe Phillips' toy so unique is the little pad on the right foot. For the first three years, her characters had faux fur on the bottom of both feet. Customers suggested to Phebe that she should sign her toys. One day, while walking out of a movie theater, she noticed a leather store. Since her business was still in its infant stage, she could only afford to put leather on one foot, so she chose the right foot and a trademark was born!

Today, business is beyond booming; and that single leather foot has become a special trademark and serves as an ideal spot for personalizing gifts with a

special autograph from the designer. But, of course, Phebe has since switched to faux leather out of respect for her real animal friends.

If she could, Phebe would make sure every child owned one of her toys. But until then, she has a separate line for the mass market called "Tweakie P." Currently, available at Michael's Craft Stores nationwide and in Canada, this more accessible line of characters and accessories cultivates creativity by allowing kids to add their own flair with bow ties, high heels and jewelry. The name is derived from the idea of taking a Phebe Phillips creation and "tweaking" it into something new. Also new at Michael's is 'Dress Up' by Phebe Phillips... sized for girls age three and up, it is a collection of ballet tutus, halos and fairy wands!

Phebe Phillips certainly knows plush toys, but it seems everyone in Hollywood knows Phebe Phillips. Recently, Salvatore Ferragamo's newborn twins were the recipients of her "Petite Couture Poodle" and "Prince Froglett." Carl Lewis purchased the "Dancing Dandy Dakota Dog" and "Dancing Tutulina Rose Rabbit." Sharon Stone also received "Dancing Dandy Dog Dakota" for her new son. And, makeup mogul Laura Mercier purchased a large plush piece for Madonna when her daughter Lourdes was born. Britney Spears received one to celebrate the birth of Spears' son, Sean Preston. So, where else would you find the crème de la crème of plush toys but Neiman Marcus, which has carried the Phebe Phillips line since 1983.

Beyond Hollywood A-listers and Olympic greats, Phebe has just as many friends on Capitol Hill. Each year, the White House hosts an Easter Egg Roll for the children of Washington, D.C., and the White House staff. Little ones gather to hunt for eggs on the South Lawn and listen to stories read by their favorite authors. Phebe sends a few hundred of her rabbits to the White House every year to serve as decoration and gifts for the event and its attendees. "It's an honor to make a product that transcends party lines and socio-economic lines. I feel a bit of reverence to be a part of Neiman Marcus for 22 years and the White House for eight years," said Phebe.

"For me, that's history."

Speaking of favorite authors, Phebe dabbles in the literary world as well. Her first book, set to be released

this August, will be based on her "Tweakie P." collection and available at Michael's. The second, set to be released at the end of the year, will be based on one of the cats from her original Phebe Phillips collection. Then, it's on to designing children's furniture styled in the same capricious fashion of her plush toys and set to debut sometime before the end of the year. "I remember everything about my childhood bedroom, and to now have the opportunity to mix my whimsical animals into room design is going to be great fun for me to create and hopefully for a child to grow up in," said Phebe.

When you meet Phebe Phillips, it's easy to see that she's just as fun-loving as the characters she creates. Her unique sense of style and passion for being imaginative began at an early age. "When you show up for the first day of first grade with red cat-eye glasses and a fuchsia dress with white polka dots, you're set up for a certain kind of life," says Phebe.

She still wears one-of-a-kind glasses, which have become another signature in themselves, and her love for animals is apparent at home, too. Phebe Phillips resides in Dallas with her husband, Mac Hargrove, two cats named Tibby and Tinker, and a silver standard poodle named Henry. She travels frequently, making appearances at all Neiman Marcus stores and special boutiques throughout the country to autograph her toys for children and the young at heart.



A PETITE COUTURE HENRI
Available at Neiman Marcus
You can remove his collar and wear it as a bracelet.

VISIT PHEBEPHILLIPS.COM AND GO TO THE NEWS & PRESS SECTION TO VIEW A TV INTERVIEW WITH PHEBE AND READ HER CURRENT BIO.