Charlie Bears – They're Coming to America!

by Pam North

 The British are coming - at least British bears are. Soon America will have Charlie Bears, an outstanding English bear-making firm.

 Charlie Bears was founded by avid bear enthusiasts, Charlotte (Charlie) and William (Will) Morris, in November, 2005, and they launched their first collection the following February. They offer creations that are lovingly handmade with meticulous attention to detail. The bears and friends within the collections are designed by both Charlie and Will, as well as by a number of very talented artists from around the world. Charlie Bears are stocked in over 30 countries internationally, and with their main Bear House in Cornwall and Cub House in Victoria, Australia. The next expansion will be to Florida. Will explained, “It was always our intention to open an office in the USA within the first five years; however, demand for our products was so great from our UK and Australian operations that we put all plans on hold until year 2011. At one stage, just two years ago, we had a 62-week back-order for our products, and we stopped taking on new customers, restricting orders so that we could get on top of demand. We now have been working very hard behind the scenes, and have reduced that back-order significantly, down to just around 20 weeks for new orders. Up until this stage, we have supplied just a handful of stockists in the USA, with no real sales activity and no physical presence, and that is all about to change. I shortly will travel to Florida to search out and select our new office/distribution facility, followed by staff interviews and stock movement. We should be fully up and running as a United States subsidiary by September, 2016, and will be actively seeking new stockists. This is a great move forward for Charlie Bears, and will mean that we can reduce the current cost of the products to our collectors, as we will be making large cost savings by dispatching from the USA rather than from the UK.”
 Charlie has collected bears since childhood, aided by her military dad, who brought her bears from all his travels. Her youthful aspirations were to be a ballet dancer, but problems with anorexia closed that path. A later bout with ovarian cancer had the effect of prodding her to crystallizing her dreams, and she opened three shops to stock artist bears.
 Will's initiation into the world of bears began when he bought a teddy bear in 2000 for his mom, who was having a bout of illness. This purchase introduced him to Charlie, and was the beginning of their relationship. The couple eventually sold everything to make their dream come true – the adventure into bear-making.
 Success has come quickly for their enterprise. After showing their bears at a trade in show in 2008, they found themselves with a huge order backlog, and they immediately recruited apprentices. Their operation grew: Bear House in Cornwall, Cub House in Australia, plus two factories in Sri Lanka, and two in Thailand. They have discovered that the love for bears spans all generations, from children to age 102, and that Europe has a large male following for bears. Charlie laughed, “Bears are a guilt-free treat for everyone!”

 When two people are combining their talents in their creations, the question comes to mind of how the two of them individually envision their bears, and how they might resolve any differences in each of their styles. Will responded to this: “ Many people have said that it must be difficult to work as a husband and wife team, and I have to say that we feel exactly the opposite. We are so lucky that we can share the excitement of building the business together, and traveling to some wonderful places again, not only as business partners, but also as a couple. We do have the odd difference of opinion, but we now have some great referees in the form of James and Ben, who are our global sales and operations managers. Rather than Charlie and I being constantly at logger heads with designs, as a general rule, Charlie is responsible for at least 95% of the bears that are to be designed, with me being let loose when I feel really strongly about a particular design - like the wildlife bunch. My strengths are running the operation of the business, and Charlie is brilliant at design, so we tend to keep it that way.”

 Charlie elaborated, “I would like to create for every kind of collector, from bears for babies to small, limited editions for adults. I hate it when a collector loves a bear, but can't afford it. I want to make bears that are accessible, affordable, but collectible. All our bears have names, and their faces are most important. Their expressions make them like little people, It's the individuality of our bears that has captured the hearts of collectors.”
 Will outlined the sizeable spectrum of creatures offered by Charlie Bears, “Our special birthday bear for 2016 is *Charlie Bear*, made from a mixture of plush and mohair, who commemorates our 10th anniversary. *Boutique* is a limited edition of fully-jointed, baby-safe bears and friends, who are all named after European royalty, and only 1000 of each character are created worldwide. The *Bearhouse Group* are unjointed characters created to encourage imaginative play for our younger collectors, 18 months and older, and are named after famous houses and palaces in the United Kingdom. *Hickory, Dickory, Doc* is a brand new mini-series introduced this year, and features a mouse you wouldn’t mind in your house. No collection would be complete without a bunny or two, so we have introduced our *Rosemary* rabbit*.* The *Timeless, Wisdom*, and *Heartfelt* bears*,* nostalgic in design and traditionally made from synthetic plush, have been a firm favorite with older collectors, and have reignited the passion for collecting teddy bears. The *Musical Maestros* are a limited edition range of miniature mohair characters, and at the other end of the spectrum are a number of characters over 3 feet tall. We have even created some 6-foot-high pieces for 2016. Our limited edition pieces – *Hudel,* a unicorn, at 400 pieces, and *Braveheart*, a lion, at 500 pieces – are two heraldic characters, made from the finest mohair and alpaca, created especially for collectors who are members of our *Best Friends Club. Grotto*, a limited to just 500 pieces and made from mohair, is our seasonal ratty character. Although created as a Christmas piece, is a character that will look fabulous all year long. Finally, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, made from a blend of alpaca and mohair and limited to only 200 pieces, is one of our masterpiece fairytale sets, known as the *Once Upon A Time* collection.”
 Asked about the future of Charlie Bears, Will answered, “We are constantly being asked what the future will bring for Charlie Bears, and we have always remained tight-lipped, although I am not so good with secrets. What I will say is that you will not want to miss our birthday bear in November. Also, if there is something you would like Charlie Bears to have a go at designing, then please send us an email, and while we can't promise that it will come out straightaway, we do like a challenge. This is only the start for Charlie Bears, and the future will bring many new products, brands, and lots more little friends. Please check our website regularly to keep up to date with new stock. And remember...... there’s always room for one more bear!”
 Will summed up their philosophy, “Both Charlie and I get so much joy from knowing that our bears have made such a difference to our collectors' lives. We know that the bears have brought a community of collectors together, both through social media and physical meets, and this makes us so happy!”

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