

Lynn Varney Interview – Harrison House Bed and Breakfast

Right at the corner of 5th Ave. and Harrison Ave. sits a bright and cheerful Victorian home. Painted in greens and purples, with flowers bursting into bloom in the surrounding gardens, you can't help but stop and admire its beauty and history. This house is the Harrison House Bed and Breakfast, a magical place filled with character, homemade yogurt, home-roasted coffee, and the most delightful almond scones and strawberry jam you will ever have. We sat down with Lynn Varney, owner and neighbor, to learn more about her and her business.

Have you always lived in Columbus? I'm from Fremont, Ohio but I've lived in Columbus since 1978. After I graduated from Purdue I was looking for a place to go and I had friends who lived here so I moved, slept on the floor for a week and then got my own place. I raised 2 daughters in Worthington.

How did you get into the Bed and Breakfast business? Before I bought Harrison House I had never owned, or even stayed at, a bed and breakfast. I had always hosted people at my home for free though. I also hosted meals when people asked me to. I thought of myself as a Martha Stewart before Martha Stewart was a celebrity. When I got divorced, my kids were young, and someone said to me "you should run a bed and breakfast," so I bought a book, read half of it and said to myself "this is my life, I want to do this!" Ten years later I bought Harrison House. It had been a bed and breakfast before I bought it.

Originally I had wanted to go back home near Fremont to be closer to family. I had been looking at places around Port Clinton and Put-in Bay but nothing panned out, then a realtor called me about a place in Columbus and I was like, "what don't you understand? I'm moving. I'm not looking for a Victorian." I walked on the porch and was like "oh man, I've got to have this place. I'm never going to leave Columbus now!" The deal went really quickly. I saw the house in September and by the end of November I was cooking breakfast for guests! I live here now with my two Shih Tzu's.

I didn't know why I loved it until I moved in. I think the house chose me. I had no choice. There were too many coincidences! I had a friend who used to make and sell wooden cutouts at the Children's Hospital TWIG holiday bazar in order to help raise money for sick children. One year she made Victorian Santas that you could have your name painted onto. I bought one. I had in the house when I was married and took it with me when I got divorced and then, finally, I sold it in a yard sale. When I bought this place I found it in the basement! The wallpaper in the foyer of Harrison House is identical to the wallpaper in my old home. Growing up my mom had collected concrete garden sculptures by a Waterville, Ohio artist called Carruth. Both my mom and I had Carruth cat bowls. One day I was sitting on the porch. I decided it was looking a little messy in the yard, and when I started to clear up the flowerbeds, there was a Carruth cat bowl! I also found a plaque of the Little Green Man made by Carruth, and I've always loved the Green Man.

Did you change anything when you took ownership of HH? When I moved in I think I changed the energy of the house. I didn't really like the energy of the place originally. I really feel like the house picks the visitors. In many cases I hear stories about visitors trying to book other places and then being sent back to the Harrison House website, and then,

when they are here, something great happens to them. I have had Harrison House for 12 years. I always have great guests, many of whom have stayed with me before. People come for football games, or to visit family in the neighborhood.

Does Harrison House ever serve as a set location for movies? We heard that a 12-foot Boa constrictor came to visit recently! A year ago a man from Gahanna contacted me about shooting a short film here. He was in film school in California and he was scouting locations for a film. The movie was about a young woman whose entire family had been visited by spirits, but she had never been visited, so her family set up a stay for her at a haunted bed and breakfast. The film was entirely funded by a Kickstarter campaign. I think it won some awards! The funny thing was that when the director booked Harrison House he had no idea that it was haunted!

More recently a music video was filmed here. Last month a man contacted me from The Film Forge (a local film studio) about a music video for a local band called Captain Kidd. He wanted to do a location shoot. The video was murder mystery themed and it was based on a dinner party for 12. Harrison House was perfect; we even have a dining room table for 12. I'm not sure how it fits with the video's story yet but they brought in a 12-foot boa (for those of you who have seen the video on Instagram, all of Lynn's china did, indeed, survive the shoot!). The video is for their song "Stay." (If you are curious you can check out the band and the film studio on Facebook and Instagram: @thefilmforge, @capn_kidd.)

Has anyone famous ever stayed here? Michael Cera (Arrested Development, Juno) stayed with us for a night. I didn't recognize him until after he had left!

Do you do all the cooking? And do you really roast your own coffee? I make everything from scratch, no box mixes at all! Everyday I make a big breakfast that includes fresh fruit, granola, my own homemade yogurt (this stuff is to die for! You can find the recipe on Lynn's website: <http://www.harrisonhouse-columbus.com/journal/> - scroll to the April 14, 2016 journal entry), and an entree. If I cook eggs, then I'll also make scones or coffee cake to go with them. I also always make bacon. Other breakfast main courses include pancakes and French toast. I use fresh ingredients when I can, and during the warmer months I grow what I can in the back yard. I also cook to any dietary needs (vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, dairy-free). I always recycle and I compost my kitchen waste. I also roast and grind my own coffee (also AMAZING! Lynn showed me how she roasts coffee and let me taste and smell some of her more recent roasts).

So you mentioned earlier that Harrison House is haunted. Can you tell us a little more about the spirits who live here? I know who is in the house at all times so I know when something is out of the ordinary. When I'm alone downstairs I've heard footsteps and creaking doors upstairs. I've run upstairs and asked who is there and it's completely empty. Once I went upstairs and found a butt print on a bed. I figured that I had just forgotten to smooth out the bed, but then it was back again when I went back into the room later in the day. I had the feeling it was a woman.

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The first summer I was in the house a family from Florida with two late teenage boys came to celebrate the 4th of July in the Midwest. As they were leaving, one of the boys asked if he could see the back garden. I thought it was a little unusual but we went out there. As soon as we got out back he said, "I don't really care about the yard. Do you think your house is haunted? I saw a man and boy twice. I sensed something as soon as I was on the sidewalk outside your house." What is really strange is that he did this completely independently. I had never said anything to him or his family and I don't advertise that this place is haunted. At this point I had never said anything to anyone.

Another time a man and a woman came to visit. They were originally only going to be staying for one night, and then the woman came up to me and told me that they needed to stay one more night. Later she told me that she was sensitive to the presence of spirits and that there were spirits in the house. She felt that she needed to talk to them. She asked me not to tell her anymore about the house, and then asked where the most haunted area of the house was. I told her the 3rd floor, so she went up to the 3rd floor alone. When she came back down she told me that she had seen a tall and thin man, in a white shirt, black jacket and pants. He smelled of rot and cigarettes. She thought he had probably died of lung disease or gangrene. He was a smoker and very chatty. She asked him why he hadn't passed and he responded, "you can't smoke in heaven and I'm not ready to give that up, so I'm staying." The woman also said she saw a boy she thought had been injured in a street accident. He had been brought into the house and had died. She said the man and the boy had lived at different times, but that the man knew about the boy and that he took care of him. She didn't think the boy knew about the man. She also said she saw a bipolar or schizophrenic man who made noise and threw things, and two women. One was associated with the boy, possibly his mother or a nanny; the other was a matriarch of the home at one point in the house's history. She also told me that the matriarch had a very special message for me, "she likes you very much and is very happy with what you are doing with the place." Apparently, she chose me. The guest also said there were portals in the house, that it was an Underground Railroad or halfway house of sorts for other spirits too.

Another time a couple came to visit. They got as far as the landing and the female guest said to me, "you know there is someone here who likes you very much and likes what you are doing right?" So I asked, "Who?" And she said, "You know who." The visitor was a medium, and she went to the third floor and identified all the same spirits, with all the same descriptions. These spirits have been identified by mediums over and over again. We have also has several amateur paranormal groups visit the house. The last group to visit brought a medium with them. They put her in a car, tell her nothing about where they are going, and then take her to locations to talk to the spirits. They usually investigate spirits that might need to be removed from the home, so they don't usually tell the owners of the homes in case they don't want to know. She was in the house for two hours, and she met and identified the same five people as the original guest. I have never seen them myself, but I have heard singing. Once someone said, "Good morning." One time someone touched the side of my neck; it was not creepy, there was no temperature associated with it, it just felt like someone touched the side of my neck. There is also a ghost cat. For a long time there was a feral cat I called "Little Black Kitty" who used to sit on the porch. It was comfy, and safe and dry. Then one day Little Black Kitty disappeared. Guests at Harrison House started

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to ask me if I had a cat. They said that they felt like a cat had rubbed up on their legs, or they could smell a litter box. They even thought the cat had curled up in bed with them. I've never had a cat and visitors don't bring cats with them, so it must be a ghost cat. For a while I thought it was Little Black Kitty but then she came back.

People have also had past loved ones visit. I have seen my mother and my grandmother. The ghosts occasionally play tricks, they steal earrings or keys, they lock the door and don't let people in. Despite the tricks, though, they are benevolent ghosts!

If you ever have family or friends coming from out of town, and you don't have enough space in your home, you can book them a room at this fabulous place:

<http://www.harrisonhouse-columbus.com/>.

If you want to learn more about the haunted side of Harrison House, check out "A Haunted History of Columbus" by Nellie Kampmann: <https://www.amazon.com/Haunted-History-Columbus-Ohio/dp/1609490878>.