

Doing her best – the Girl Guide way



Girl guide leader, Denise Woodhouse, winner of the prestigious Girlguiding Laurel Award, seen here (in centre) with some of her older girl guides. (Photo by Tamell Simons)



Denise Woodhouse working with older girl guides in the organisation Girlguiding Bermuda.

By [Jessie Moniz](#)

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Denise Woodhouse, first took the Girl Guide promise in the English countryside as a five-year-old: ‘I promise that I will do my best; to love my God, to serve my Queen and my country, to help other people and to keep the Guide law’.

Now in her mid-50s, and living in Bermuda, she still follows that creed. Mrs. Woodhouse is a former commissioner of Girlguiding Bermuda. A branch of Girlguiding United Kingdom (GGUK), it encourages girls from age five to 18 in various activities they work on life skills, go on camping trips, earn merit badges and do community work.

What is most impressive is that Mrs. Woodhouse has always done her best, the Girl Guide way, despite some enormous obstacles. A few years ago, she was diagnosed with a degenerative condition, hereditary spastic paraplegia, which has similar symptoms to multiple sclerosis. Initial symptoms include sudden trips and falls; persons eventually become paralysed. Mrs. Woodhouse, who uses a cane, refuses to let the condition slow her down.

This month, her life-long dedication to Girlguiding Bermuda was recognised with a Laurel Award from the United Kingdom. She is thought to be the first person in Bermuda to receive the prestigious honour in several decades. GGUK hands out less than 20 Laurel Awards per year worldwide. “Anne Llewellyn-Jones, branch associations advisor for GGUK, was in Bermuda ostensibly to do training,” said Mrs. Woodhouse. “We had a special tea that included [Governor Sir Richard Gozney’s wife] Lady Gozney. At the tea, Mrs Llewellyn-Jones stood up and said she wasn’t really in Bermuda to do training. She was here to give me the Laurel Award.”

Mrs. Woodhouse, a person who is not easily duped, was floored. “It was humbling,” she said. Mrs. Woodhouse received a special badge in recognition of the award, and a pile of recommendation letters from people in the community, some from her own Girl Guides. It is the letters she is most proud of. “I called my mother and my sister in England, who are also heavily involved with Girlguiding and they were both in tears,” she said.

Girl Guide Reem Bushara wrote: “Denise has greatly raised my confidence from the time I started Girl Guides and I believe she is a great part of making me the person I am today and I can only hope that I can contribute at least half of what she has in my lifetime.”

Liz Burnley, chief Girl Guide in the UK, wrote: “I met Denise initially shortly after starting as chief Guide and was immediately impressed by her drive and energy and passion for developing guiding in Bermuda.” In April, Mrs. Woodhouse handed over the post of commissioner of GirlGuiding Bermuda to Shirlene Tucker, but she is still heavily involved. She has a Brownie troop (primary school girls) in St George’s and an older girls group in Pembroke.

“In the last five years, we have basically reinvented Girlguiding in Bermuda,” she said. One of the achievements she is most proud of is this month GirlGuiding Bermuda finally resolving an 84-year-old dispute with the Bermuda High School for Girls over the true ownership of the Lady Asser Hut next to the school on Richmond Road. This month a court ruled that Girlguiding Bermuda owns the land where its hut is situated. The unresolved legal issue delayed renovations at the Lady Asser Hut, including the replacement of cracked and crumbling steps, the building of a disabled pathway and the levelling of the back area for gardening and camping.

“That’s all history now,” said Mrs. Woodhouse. “Now we are looking forward to what we are going to do with the property. It is going to take a lot of money to renovate the building, but we can do it.” As an example of what a little Girl Guide power can do, last year Mrs. Woodhouse spearheaded a drive to raise \$90,000 so that Bermuda Girl Guides could take part in Girl Guiding centennial celebrations in Mexico and England. Girlguiding was first started in 1910 in England by Lord Baden Powell. “Maybe with my personality, I seem to have instilled a positive vibe in the community that guiding is very alive,” said Mrs. Woodhouse.

She first started with the organisation as a Brownie in East Sussex. Her father was a dairy farmer and she was one of five brothers and sisters. They were what she describes as “land rich and cash poor”. She moved to Bermuda about 30 years ago, and had a daughter, Hailey Giles. “When my daughter was young I became involved with Girl Guides again,” said Mrs. Woodhouse, “and I have been involved ever since.” Miss Giles is following in her mother’s footsteps and operates a rainbow troop out of St Mark’s Church in Smith’s parish. The rainbows are the youngest members of the Girl Guides, around five years old. Then, 15 years ago, Mrs. Woodhouse was diagnosed with hereditary spastic paraplegia, a rare disease that her mother and cousin also share.

“It means that I am going to be paralysed from my waist down at some point in the future,” she said. “I will eventually be in a wheelchair, but hopefully not for many, many years. This serves as a challenge to me, but also to my girls. I try to show them that this is something that you mustn’t let get to you no matter what. Sometimes I get miserable and want to have a pity party, but I know these girls are relying on me to help them forge their way in the world. All my past rangers [the oldest girls in Girlguiding Bermuda] have got full scholarships and I hope that will continue. Whatever their course in life, they will be positive. Whatever lemon you are dealing with, you just need to get on with it.”

From her earliest days Mrs. Woodhouse showed a passion for leadership. She was head girl in her secondary school in East Sussex. As a young girl she received the Queens Guide Award, which is the highest Girl Guide award. “When I was young I was going to be a teacher in a small school,” said Mrs. Woodhouse. “I have always pushed myself. I loved make-up and arts and stage make-up. At age 16, everyone said, ‘you can’t go to university’. To study beauty, you had to go to private colleges in London that cost money. My school headmaster said ‘let’s see what we can do’. He found a sponsor and apprenticeship for me. I went to Arnold Taylor College in London. I was taught by Lady Brisbane in a very exclusive class with just four of us. I was taught beauty therapy. On my day off I went to another college and did hairdressing day release. I was only 16 years old. I wasn’t supposed to be in college until I was 18. All my life, people have said, ‘you can’t do that’. As the years progressed I did teacher training and became a teacher as well as everything else.”

In Bermuda she has been part of charities such as the Lions Club and the Lioness Club, she has taught hair and beauty at CedarBridge Academy, and she now owns Renaissance Hair Salon. “Lord Baden Powell said ‘leave this world a better place’,” said Mrs. Woodhouse. “I would have never done the things in my life had I not had the experience of guiding to try new things and to test myself. That is why I need to pass that on to the girls.”

For more information about Girlguiding see www.girlguiding.org.uk/. For information about Girlguiding Bermuda telephone 008675 or email info@bermudaguides.com