



Business owners and reenactors Mike “Frog” and Sharlene Montgomery take a smoke break while watching a wedding take place on their property, Dogwood Pass. The couple built their replica late 1800s-style Wild West town from the ground-up.

Endure and Evolve

Photos and Story by Erica Brechtelsbauer

Twenty-three years ago, 18-year-old Tessa Lynn Pryor sang Rod Stewart’s “Broken Arrow,” as her mother rode in on horseback to meet her soon-to-be husband, Mike Montgomery.

It was July 31, 1993: Sharlene and “Frog” Montgomery’s wedding day. Sharlene was dressed as an Indian maiden, while Mike wore traditional mountain man attire. The ceremony took place in a carved-out area of the woods, a part of 80 acres of land Mike had inherited from his family. In attendance were all their kids from their previous marriages, Sharlene’s four and Mike’s two.

“We were the Brady Bunch,” jokes Sharlene.

The two met a couple years before where they both worked at a local factory in Beaver, Ohio.

“He pursued me without my knowing,” says Sharlene.

She recalls the way he controlled the room and how he clearly was the center of attention. Once the two started talking, they knew their relationship was unlike ones they had had in the past.

“We were different together, we were better together,” says Mike.

After they married, both continued to work at the factory. Mike had also grown up working on the farm his whole life, so continued breaking and training horses as well.

All things considered, with the craziness of work and raising 6 kids, their new marriage worked. Unfortunately, all too soon, their strength as a couple and family was tested in the worst way imaginable.

On the morning of April 5, 1994, less than a year after the wedding, Sharlene’s second oldest, Tessa, tagged along with friends for a ride to school. A decision amongst the group to go drag racing was made, and ultimately led to a fatal crash. Tessa Lynn Pryor, who was 19 years old, was the only one to pass away from the accident.

“That day completely changed the dynamic of our relationship. Sharlene completely shut down,” says Mike.

Sharlene recalls the day of the funeral; she says, “Tessa knew how to live. She touched so many people. I had multiple people come to me to say that she was their best friend. That day didn’t feel real.”

Following the funeral, Mike found that he wasn’t sure how to handle Sharlene’s depression or his own grief as a stepfather. He realized the only thing that worked for him was to do what he always had—work and stay busy. Moving forward day by day was what he saw as important, so he worked to push Sharlene by keeping her occupied as much as possible.

The first project following Tessa’s death was the rock garden. It was a project they both had started before the crash, but



Left: Sharlene, also known as "Calamity Jane," stands outside while waiting for Mike to help her tie her corset. The couple dressed in their reenactment costumes as part of the entertainment for a wedding at Dogwood Pass.

Sharlene and Mike hold a portrait of their daughter, Tessa Lynn Pryor. On April 5, 1994 the 19-year-old was killed in a car crash on the way to school. "Her funeral was packed-- truly a testament of how many lives she touched and how many loved her," says Sharlene.

Sharlene remembered how much Tessa loved the idea.

“It was hard, you’re just working through the sweat and tears,” says Sharlene.

Eventually though, she found that keeping busy helped keep her mind distracted from the pain.

And so that’s what they continued to do, along with variations of grief counseling, therapy, and psychic readings over the years. Passing time helped heal and alleviate some pain, and the Montgomery’s could enjoy life again.

“Seven years is what it took for me to feel a difference. If I had been alone, I would’ve just crawled into a dark corner, but Frog made me live,” says Sharlene.

Both agree that their loss made them stronger as a couple, and now, as business partners of Dogwood Pass, a replica 1800’s-style Old West town built up on their land.

Growing up, Mike always had dreamed of having a saloon to relax at after a long day of work, or a place for all the adults to hang out away from the kids. In 2009, Mike and Sharlene decided to make that dream a reality, by building and fully decorating a saloon in the woods behind their homestead.

It was initially just a fun project for the two. However, over the course of its progress, it became a lifestyle. From the swinging doors, to the long paneled bar, the steer horns and deer mounts across the walls, antique pianos and a stage for the musicians and saloon girls—it all came together. From the start, they found lots of antiques in flea markets, and even began receiving donations from families and friends who wanted to have their heirlooms used for display.

Once the saloon was finished, Sharlene and Mike became overwhelmed with compliments and feedback from family and friends. They soon realized the saloon couldn’t be the end of their project. They needed a town.

In the three years to follow, many more buildings popped up along the land—a jail, mercantile, bank, bath house, town room, blacksmith shop, livery, gun shop, freight office, and chapel. Also included are a row of storefronts—a range office, barber/dentist, dance hall, meat market, fur trade and more.

“I never had any blue print or plan, it was just in my head. I knew what I wanted, so we just kept adding on,” says Mike.

The couple decided to open their western town, Dogwood



Top: Part of the town of Dogwood Pass. Pictured are the mercantile, jail and saloon. The saloon was the first building Mike and Sharlene built on the property in 2009.

Left: Mike repairs a door in the bath house in town, while Sharlene keeps him company. On a normal day, Mike has to eat every two hours to compensate for the amount of physical labor he does around town.

Mike slides one of his pistols into his holster. During a wedding ceremony, he and three other reenactors fired shots after the bride and groom tied the knot.



The Montgomery's stand with two other volunteer reenactors, Sharlene's brother Steve Leasure, and friend Jeff Grennell in front of the new Roy Rogers Memory's Museum in town. The four are part of approximately 80 reenactors involved, who visit and put on shows at Dogwood Pass during festivals throughout the year.



Shep, the Montgomery's Australian Shepard, rests on the ground next to the fire pit, while Mike and Sharlene take a break from working. "Everywhere you look Shep is there following by your side. If the horses are anywhere in site, Shep is right there next to them," says Sharlene.

Pass, to the public in 2011. Since then, it has taken up all of their time and energy.

From making flea market runs, to receiving donations from museums, having a film crew come out to shoot a movie, building a reenactment community, putting up new buildings, cabins or outhouses, preparing for the next festival or wedding as Mike explains, "there's something going on here almost every hour of every day."

Chris Armstrong and Jeff Grennell, both volunteer reenactors, stopped by during a weekend to help the couple get ready for their upcoming chili festival.

"I came here a couple years ago to visit, and was immediately attracted to the place. I wanted to be involved," says Grennell. Grennell had always carried a fascination with cowboys and western towns, but never knew he could live out his passion until coming upon Dogwood Pass.

"The energy here is what attracted me," said Armstrong. "Sharlene and Mike are so devoted to creating the most authentic town they can. I saw how much the town was growing and I wanted to be part of the it."

In the last six years, the couple has formed a community of around 80 volunteer reenactors.

"As a couple we have a multitude of friends that come here and hang out with us. It's kind of like they're drawn to us or our way of life," says Mike.

The reenactors, craftsmanship, every small detail, the gorgeous land, and the energy of the couple that runs it all have played into Dogwood Pass being wildly successful. The two never imagined their project turned hobby turned obsession could ever become a tourist attraction. They've added parts to the town they never would have built on their own to accommodate for all the visitors, including their most recent project: a Roy Rogers Memory Museum.

"Everything was donated from family members of Rodgers and other museums," says Sharlene.

As Mike and Sharlene take a rare break to sit by the fire one early morning, they reflect on the town and all of the work that was put into it. It's been years in the making day-by-day, and continues to be an ongoing project for the couple. However, throughout all their time dedicated to the business, they still find their fun time for each other, whether it's going on trail rides with their horses or spending time with their kids and grandchildren.

"We have Cole, my grandson, who has helped out quite a bit over the years and Sharlene's brother Steve. Other family members will contribute as reenactors during festivals, or other projects throughout the year when they can," says Mike.

It's been the plan to keep the land and the town in the family. In fact, there's no other option for the two. Throughout all of their success, they have never lost sight of the only thing that matters—their love and family. Tessa's death transformed their lives and the decisions they've made to get them to where they are today.

"After you go through something like that, nothing can tear you down in comparison. Absolutely nothing. Everything else is petty. If this town burned down, it wouldn't shake us to the magnitude that her death did," said Mike.

Mike and Sharlene are without a doubt, a power couple. The Montgomery's are a couple that has been transformed through loss and pushed through unfathomable emotional obstacles. Still, they've proved what persisting hard work and enduring love can create.



Sharlene and Mike ride their truck to the local Dollar General in Beaver. "We don't have time to go grocery shopping or run many errands. We kinda just have to grab things as we go," says Sharlene.

Right: The Montgomery's pose for a portrait outside their gun shop at Dogwood Pass. Both have been working non-stop to prepare for their annual chili festival.



"After you go through something like that, nothing can tear you down in comparison. Absolutely nothing. Everything else is petty. If this town burned down, it wouldn't shake us to the magnitude that her death did."



The Montgomery's go for a trail ride with their horses and Australian Shepard, Shep. The couple has nine horses on their farm and uses them for rides for guests and shows for festivals throughout the year. When they find time for eachother outside of work and running the business, they ride the trails in the woods behind their property.