

# Cape May Point woman makes patchwork quilt out of celebrity autographs to help animal welfare

By MARTIN DeANGELIS



**CAPE MAY POINT** — Joan D'Avanzo has all kinds of celebrities hanging around her house.

She has generations of actors, a cast that ranges from Patrick Dempsey to Angela Lansbury. The musicians line up from Loretta Lynn to Yo-Yo Ma. Political types stretch

across the spectrum — Ted Kennedy to Rush Limbaugh, reading left to right — and media moguls include Meredith Vieira and Walter Cronkite.

Now it's true some of the above stars are dead, but they still hang out constantly at D'Avanzo's place — in the form of their autographs.

Over the past dozen or so years, the retired art teacher has gotten all those luminaries, and a whole lot more, to sign their names to 4-inch squares of cloth she's incorporating into an oversized, celebrity-centric quilt. She has so many famous signatures collected, her work is now 16 feet long — and growing, as she starts on a new section of her multiyear quilting bee.

But D'Avanzo doesn't collect all these celebrities because she's star-struck. She does it because she's struck by the plight of millions of unwanted dogs, cats and other animals that may face death if they aren't adopted and offered homes.

She calls her project “The Animal Compassion Quilt: Signed by the Famed for the Millions Unnamed” — because the former spay/neuter-clinic volunteer hopes to use the star power in her creation to draw attention to the lives of those creatures.

The 62-year-old textile artist is happy to say she’s gotten many of the signatures on her quilt because the celebrities are as dedicated to animal welfare as she is. Some of the stars even add their pets’ names — plus the occasional paw print — to their little squares on the quilt. Mel Brooks, the comedian/filmmaker, was the first to include a critter signature with his own, she said.

“And Kim Basinger gave hers back with a whole square filled with animal signatures,” D’Avanzo said.

Bob Barker, the longtime “Price Is Right” host turned active advocate of animal rights, is another like-minded signer. Then there’s Tippi Hedren, the actress/double celebrity — she’s the mother of movie star Melanie Griffith, but lately, Hedren has also been known for running an 80-acre animal preserve in California.

Hedren signed the very first square on the Animal Compassion Quilt, D’Avanzo said, “followed very closely by Mary Tyler Moore,” a co-founder of “Broadway Barks,” another star-fueled project to help animals in the New York area.

D’Avanzo has been quilting for close to 35 years, and she has been at the animal project for so long now, she admits there are details she just can’t remember, including who signed a few of the squares. Some autographs were signed so long ago that they’ve faded.

Take, for one, “Dustin Hoffman — I had to go back and look that one up,” she said.

The quilter had several inspirations for her work. Artistically, there was a visit to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she was smitten with a quilt from the 1860s that was signed by notable Civil War figures.

On the animal end, she started working on her quilt not long after she and her husband, Bob, visited a shelter looking for a dog to rescue, and were saddened to find the conditions “dirty, noisy and smelly,” she said.

Plus in celebrity circles, she has been influenced by her brother-in-law, Stephen D'Avanzo, who she said was "an avid collector of signatures" and has given her some helpful tips.

Still, she doesn't have one sure method for getting modern stars to add their John Hancocks to her quilt, so she tries different ways.

Many, she has just walked up to them and asked, often after she was a paying audience member at one of their performances.

She arrived at singer/actor Harry Connick Jr.'s autograph that way, as well as "Hal Linden (of 'Barney Miller' fame), Ben Vereen, Natalie Cole, Joy Behar ('The View') and let's see, Meredith Vieira is around here somewhere. ... Glenn Close, Emmylou Harris."

The list goes on. For other celebrities, she has put one of her 4-inch squares in an envelope with a description of her project and sent it by mail. She has gotten a bunch of signatures that way, but she has also gotten a handful of rejection letters. Al Gore and George W. Bush declined politely (and separately), D'Avanzo said, but Bush's father and presidential predecessor, George H.W., did sign a square.

A recent visitor to her studio — on the top floor of the home she and Bob, a retired lawyer, share with Nina and Molly, two rescued dogs — spotted an envelope addressed to Sir Paul McCartney, waiting only for a stamp and a mailbox.

Eileen Crossman, a Lower Township resident who met D'Avanzo through local animal-welfare groups for which they both volunteered, is impressed by all the names on her friend's quilt. But Crossman is also a fan of the art around those names, including some of the creatures incorporated into the Animal Compassion Quilt.

She cites Koko, the gorilla famously taught sign language by Penny Patterson, the trainer/author — Patterson signed the quilt, and sent back a square decorated by the celebrity gorilla, too.

"It is breathtaking how Joan can turn fabric into animals," said Crossman, who has seen the reaction when the quilt gets a public showing, as it has done a few times, including recently at The Mad Batter, a restaurant in Cape May. "People are pretty much in awe of her work. ... It's a unique idea."

Now, D'Avanzo is hoping to find a permanent public home for the Animal Compassion Quilt, because she wants many more people to see it, and to hear her messages: Unwanted animals need help, in the form of loving homes, and the best way to cut the number of unwanted animals is to make spaying and neutering programs widely available, as she helped do for five years through the Animal Alliance of Cape May County.

The artist does not have the perfect place in mind for her celebrity quilt, but she said it has to be public and wants to make sure the space has room to include educational materials on improving animals' lives. Any donations it generates should go to spay/neuter programs in the area where it ends up.

And she doesn't need it to stay close to home in Cape May Point. Asked where she'd like to see it go, she mentions as possibilities Atlantic City, possibly in a casino space; New York, maybe in a busy art gallery; and even Branson, Mo. — all three of which have the ability to draw crowds, plus ongoing love affairs with celebrities.

But even if she finds the perfect home for her Animal Compassion Quilt, that doesn't mean she's actually finished making the quilt. After all, she's still collecting stars and creating art around them.

"I will just keep on going," D'Avanzo said, "as long as I have the ability to — and people are willing to sign."