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Sheep Shape

By [Julie K.L. Dam](#)

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A few months after Shari Lewis died of uterine cancer in 1998 at age 65, her longtime friend, actor Dom DeLuise, asked her daughter Mallory Tarcher if she had thought about bringing back Lewis's most beloved creation, Lamb Chop. Tarcher responded by slipping on the saucy sock puppet and speaking for the first time in its distinctive, Carol Channing-like voice, which has charmed generations of kids. "I got a little teary-eyed," recalls DeLuise.

Tarcher, 38, hopes to elicit more emotions shepherding Shari's little lamb. At the Daytime Emmy Awards last May, the audience erupted in applause when she brought Lamb Chop with her to accept the Outstanding Performer in a Children's Series for her mother's work in *The Charlie Horse Music Pizza*. "Shari woulda been so happy," Lamb Chop cooed onstage. Indeed she woulda: Now Tarcher (who is in the process of changing her last name to Lewis) is developing a new animated Lamb Chop series that she hopes will begin next fall. Whenever she and Lamb Chop appear in public together—whether skydiving for a uterine cancer charity in honor of Lewis (with Lamb Chop tucked inside her jumpsuit) or touring Japan to promote Lamb Chop merchandise or even just sitting on planes—the fans flock. "It's funny to watch," says Tarcher, "how these burly men come up shyly and tell me, 'Thanks for keeping Lamb Chop alive.'"

It almost didn't happen. "I never touched Lamb Chop till my mom died," says Tarcher, cradling the puppet at the Malibu home she shares with her husband of four years, cinematographer Brad Hood, 41, and their 21-month-old son Jamie. "I never even tried her voice, let alone the ventriloquism." But the urge to revive Lamb Chop just got stronger and stronger. And as soon as she slipped the sock puppet on her hand, she marvels, "it was like I was channeling Lamb Chop." Her family, who had some reservations, was astonished. "I was not eager for Mallory to have a secondhand career," says her father, book publisher and producer Jeremy Tarcher, 68, who was married to Lewis for 40 years. "But she does it so well, I can't object. It's a little bit of *Twilight Zone*, but in a pleasant way." Adds his sister, novelist Judith Krantz: "I was stunned. It's Lamb Chop very much the way Shari did it."

Perhaps that's due to their lifetime bond. An only child, Mallory grew up with her mother's creations. But unlike actress Candice Bergen, who admitted to having a love-hate relationship with her father Edgar's dummy Charlie McCarthy, Tarcher considers Lamb Chop a sister. "Charlie had his own bedroom," Krantz points out.

“And it was bigger than Candy’s! Lamb Chop stayed in a box when she wasn’t performing.” Even though Mallory went to Beverly Hills High with the children of celebrities, she had “a perfectly normal life,” says DeLuise. Her only luxuries, Mallory notes, were “books, travel and semesters abroad.”

And a fun family business to join. Tarcher began spending time at the studio with her mother as a teen. After leaving Barnard College in 1984, she spent time as a writer for Hanna-Barbera and Disney shows before becoming a full-time writer and creative supervisor for her mother’s shows. “It was wonderful working with Mom,” she says.

But then, in June 1998, Lewis was diagnosed with cancer. She left the doctor’s office with Tarcher at her side and went back to work, insisting on taping “Hello, Goodbye”—a wistful tune about having to leave loved ones behind—as scheduled. “We did three takes,” Tarcher says, “and that was that.” Six weeks later, she succumbed to her illness. But her memory lives on in Lamb Chop, thanks to Tarcher. “When my mom died, it was either over, or I had to try,” she says. “And Lamb Chop didn’t want to die.” A little voice pipes up from Tarcher’s elbow. “I was in the closet for a year, you know,” it says indignantly. “But now,” Lamb Chop chirps blissfully, “I’m baaaaaack!”

Julie K.L. Dam

Karen Grigsby Bates in Malibu