

Today's *Woman*

CREATIVE SPIRIT

Artist Deborah Cavenaugh
talks about life, art and
spreading color in the world.

Deborah Cavenaugh at her
studio on Wrightsville Avenue.

Art is in her heart

Artist Deborah Cavanaugh uses her talent to help encourage others

BY PAM SANDER

Pam.Sander@StarNewsOnline.com

Deborah Cavanaugh never set out to be an artist. She took an art class in middle school, just as so many youngsters do when they're first given the chance to choose an elective. "In school, there's always kids who are the artists," she says. "I wasn't one of them." After getting a B-minus in the class, the until then straight-A student turned her attention back to other studies. She would go on to obtain a degree in behavior modification from the University of Virginia.

She wouldn't turn her attention back to art until years later, after a painful divorce transplanted her from Washington, D.C., to Wilmington. Her two young children, Hunter and Layne, had given her a set

UP-CLOSE

What she does:

Art, prints, cards, commissions, motivational coaching.

Where: Studio gallery, 5028 Wrightsville Ave., Wilmington.

Gallery hours: 11-6 Tuesday-Friday, 11-5 Saturday, and by appointment.

Website: www.

DeborahCavanaugh.com

Phone: 297-5383.

of watercolors for Mother's Day just as her marriage was coming to an end, and she used the gift and painting as a way to channel her grief. For her first year in Wilmington, she renovated a historic home at North 18th and Chestnut streets, and painted with those watercolors.

When the house was complete, she visited a local shop to have her artwork

framed. She wanted to display the bright pieces as a reminder of how one can emerge from a dark place into a life filled with happiness and color. She was surprised when the Wilmington shop owner made a fuss over her work and encouraged her to do more. Her son's worry that, with the house completed, she would have to get a job was further encouragement. "He came to me and asked if he was going to have to start getting in the after-school care line instead of the mommy line," she says.

Initially, she supported her calling with commissioned work – portraits of families, pets and homesteads. With each assignment, she would find out what mattered to the family and discreetly include those elements in the work. Today, her commissioned pieces are even more in demand, with one recently



'I am not a schooled artist; I can't draw a straight line; but I know my art encourages people,' says Deborah Cavanaugh. *StarNews file photo*

commanding \$10,000. Most, however, are in the \$300 to \$800 range.

In the 15 years since that first trip to the frame shop, Cavanaugh's audience has grown to the far reaches of the world. Her original paintings, prints and card lines are distributed internationally. Her watercolors, many of them beach and garden scenes

or still-lives inscribed with handwritten affirmations ("I'm believing that all things are possible"), emit a kind of hard-won serenity. "The affirmations are me allowing you to know about me, just as an audience relates to song lyrics," she says. "The audience has to get what the song is saying to them, or it won't work. It may have been

written about the loss of a best friend, but you connect to it because you've just sent a child off to college."

"I don't know how to fix anything that's wrong in the world right now," she says. "I am not a schooled artist; I can't draw a straight line; but I know my art encourages people."

Cavanaugh never intended great wealth from her passion, only to connect with people, make ends meet and send her two children to college. "I'm always willing to look at what I've got and what I know," she says. "I'm good at talking to people through my art." Her rewards, though, have been much greater than she ever imagined. Hunter, now 27, graduated from the University of Virginia with a film studies degree. In addition to creating and managing her award-winning website (www.DeborahCavanaugh.com), he's working on a screenplay. Layne graduated more than a year ago from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. During the summer between her junior and senior years, she interned for then first lady Laura Bush. Following graduation, she joined John McCain's campaign team. "That's what has made my life worth it," Cavanaugh says. "I hit it out of the park with my kids."

A year ago, she opened a gallery at 5028 Wrightsville Ave., near Cape Fear Hospital, and began to spread her artist wings in other directions. She has begun creating what she calls torn paper mosaics, large paintings that incorporate small torn pieces of paper from magazines. From a distance, the pieces resemble broken tiles. She's also added jewelry to her collection, begun renovating old furniture and started dabbling in interior design. With the furniture line, Cavanaugh's relationship with her audience continues to evolve. The furniture, typically old pieces not considered antiques, see new life through her vision. "Everyone and everything deserves a second chance," she says. "We have furniture that means something to us, but it's junk now. I want to turn it into something you can't throw away."

Already Cavanaugh works 12-hour days, six days a week, and with such a focus on these new avenues for her art, the blank canvases in the back of her studio could collect dust. But they won't.

"I eventually get to the point where my heart gets too full and I must paint," she says.