

SUNDAY

NEW SOUTH SURVIVORS

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ART IN WILMINGTON

'The isle of dreams'



Deborah Cavanaugh is a self-taught artist whose prints and card lines are distributed internationally. Photo by Mike Spencer

Cavanaugh strives to take her audience to a world of beauty.

By PAM SANDER
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Look closely at the artwork covering the walls of Deborah Cavanaugh's gallery on Wrightsville Avenue and you'll get to know her, both through what the works say and what they don't say.

Cavanaugh is a gifted, world-renowned artist who envisions color and beauty on even the dreariest of days. In fact, it was just that sort of day more than 15 years ago that pulled her into the bright world she now inhabits and shares with an audience of friends, collectors and everyday people who see themselves in her creations.

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

Cavanaugh, whose latest painting "life is easy on the isle of dreams" is featured on the 2009 StarNews Collectors Cup, is a self-taught artist whose 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 said. "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

STARNEWS COLLECTORS CUP

The cup: Available for \$9.95 beginning Nov. 11 and continuing through the holiday season, while supplies last. Includes a replica of artist Deborah Cavanaugh's "life is easy on the isle of dreams (Bald Head Island)," which depicts the waterfront at Bald Head Island.

Two signings:

- At the artist's gallery: 7-9 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 11, 5028 Wrightsville Ave. near Cape Fear Hospital.
- At the StarNews: 10 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 12, 1003 S. 17th St. in Wilmington.

Extras:

- Those purchasing a cup during one of the signings will be entered in a drawing to receive a signed print of "life is easy on the isle of dreams."
- Those purchasing a cup during the signings also may purchase previous ones in the nearly two-decade-long series for 50 percent off.



Art wasn't in the plan

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 said. "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 her other studies. She would go on to get a degree in behavior modification from the University of Virginia.

Young adulthood included vacations at Martha's Vineyard and abroad and living among the elite in Washington, D.C., with her successful stockbroker husband. In the mid-1980s, she left her job to become a stay-at-home mom to their two children. But in 1992, her well-to-do world darkened. Her husband wanted out of the marriage.

"It's hard to describe that pain," she said.

He left just before Mother's Day, and, as often happens to children, her 8-year-old son, Hunter, focused on what was directly in front of him. "Hunter

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

CAVENAUGH

Continued from ID

came to me and said, 'Mom, it's almost Mother's Day. How will I get somewhere to get you something?'"

Though she didn't know it at the time, the child's dilemma would be the art world's first tug at her life. She walked Hunter and his younger sister, Layne, around the corner to Sullivan's, an old-fashioned toy store on Wisconsin Avenue, near Embassy Row. The store had a crafts section in the back, and Cavanaugh was envisioning a plastic weaving loom for making potholders.

"I was in such a bad place," she said. "I envisioned sitting around at night weaving, crying and drinking cheap beer."

Instead, Hunter and Layne chose to give her a small box of watercolors.

Her husband suggested she take the kids and move to a historic home he had purchased without her knowledge in Wilmington. It needed a lot of work, he said, and well, she was crafty. Turned out the home built in 1900 was the art world's second tug on her. For one year, she immersed herself in the kids and the renovation.

"No work had ever been done on it," Cavanaugh said. "But at its core, it was spectacular." She spent nights and days painting walls and crying, scrubbing floors and crying, decorating and crying, but by the end of the year, she emerged, just as the house did, in a better place.

Feeling the pull

When a Wilmington shop owner inquired about some works she brought in for framing and suggested she consider doing more, the art world tugged at her a little harder. Her son's latest worry was that with the house completed, she would have



Artist Deborah Cavanaugh works 12-hour days, six days a week on mosaics, jewelry, furniture and paintings
Photo by Mike Spencer

to get a job. That was the final tug she couldn't ignore.

"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 said. She decided then that she would take the art thing seriously and stay in the mommy line awhile longer.

"I'm always willing to look at what I've got and what I know," she said. "I'm good at talking to people through my art."

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

Elizabeth Dunlop of Wilmington met Cavanaugh nearly 15 years ago when she commissioned the artist to create a portrait of her family. Dunlop, like so many others, was immediately drawn to her work.

"Every time I look at one of her pieces, there's something about it that just warms me and touches my heart," Dunlop said. "She really gets what life is about."

The Dunlops have at least one Cavanaugh painting or

print in nearly every room of their home. A favorite, of a woman making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for her two children, hangs in the kitchen. The affirmation reads: "I find peace here, in my own, true center."

"She didn't paint that for me," Dunlop said. "But it speaks to me. Every time I go to her studio, at least one of the pieces speaks to me."

A proud parent

Cavanaugh never intended great wealth from her passion, only to connect with people, make ends meet and send her two children to college. Her rewards 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 Web site (www.DeborahCavanaugh.com), he's nearly finished with his first screenplay.

Layne, now 23, graduated 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 said. "I hit it out of the park

with my kids."

New directions

In the past year, she has 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, has begun renovating old furniture and has started dabbling in interior design, something she's been passionate about since before she turned the worn-out historic home at Chestnut and 18th streets into a masterpiece.

With the furniture line, Cavanaugh's relationship with her audience continues to evolve. The furniture, typically old pieces not considered antiques, get new life through her vision. "Everyone and everything deserves a second chance," she said. "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 said.

Her next series will be inspired by Francine Mazursky, a minor character in a book she read many years ago. Francine is an everywoman who has guided Cavanaugh through the years.

"She lives by the sea and is mindful that for most of us, even the toughest days you'd give anything to get back once they're gone," Cavanaugh said. "She helps me focus on what really counts."