

Personal Business

CAREER PATH

Gift from a child launches an art career

In 1992, I became separated after a 20-year marriage, and moved to Wilmington. Just before our move, my son, who was eight, asked how he would be able to get me a Mother's Day present, as he wasn't old enough to go shopping alone, and there was now no one else to take him.

I told my son that I would take him to the store and he could go in by himself and pick out a gift for me. He bought me a pad of paper, a set of watercolors and a brush. The only art course I had ever taken was in the 8th grade. I hated it when my kids gave me those paints because I knew they expected me to paint something. To show them that I like my present I painted a few pictures.

A year later, I thought about the paintings I had made, which were now in a box under my bed. I decided I would have a couple of them framed and hang them in my bedroom. I took them to a framer downtown and that was the day that everything changed for me.

A gallery owner saw my paintings on a framing table. She asked me if I had done them, and I reluctantly told her yes. She then asked me in what gallery she could find my work. I said to her that my work was home in a box under my bed. She laughed and asked if I would show them to her. I did – and she sold three of my pieces the next week and later sold all the other dozen or so that I had.

Then, in January of 1994, I got a



PHOTO BY WOODY WESTLAKE

call from Caffé Phoenix, asking if I would like to do a show. The person who planned their shows had seen a couple of my pieces in a gallery. I didn't have any art, and it takes about 24 pieces to do a show at Caffé Phoenix. The show date was only a month away. I agreed to do it and said to myself, "What have I done?" I didn't even know where to buy art supplies in this town. In those days, there was just a hobby store at the mall. I had to

buy paper and brushes and art supplies. I cleared space in the middle of my guest room floor, and I began to paint. For the next 20 or 25 days, I painted every waking moment. And then everything had to be framed and hung at Caffé Phoenix.

About two weeks after I put that show up, I went in to experience it by myself. As blessing or karma or coincidence would have it, sitting at a table was one of the owners of Acme

Deborah Cavanaugh

COMPANY: Deborah Cavanaugh Studio/Gallery

TITLE: Owner

HOMETOWN: Harrisonburg, Va.

AGE: 56

Art, whose lunch guest didn't show. The waiter had told her that the show was mine, and she invited me to join her.

After lunch, she offered to show me

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her studio. It's a group studio, with about 18 working artists. As I looked around, I saw evidence of children, and I asked if the artists brought their children there. She said yes, many of them did. I decided then that being a mother and having a career as an artist were compatible, and it was how I would proceed.

That day, I rented a studio for one year. I didn't know anything about being an artist. How does an artist set prices? How does an artist get work? I didn't know, but by the end of that year, my work was in several galleries, and I was selling four to six paintings a month.

I don't paint like anybody else. I just paint like me. I don't even know how to talk about painting – I just do it. I've come to understand that I'm a naïve impressionist, a painter of Americana.

My paintings tell a story of comfortable scenes and familiar images. The work I'm best known for is my print line. I developed it because I realized I had a following of younger women who really love my work and understood it but couldn't afford it.

So I set out to create a print line that now has more than 350 images in it. I already have about 15 images ready to add in 2009. And out of the print line came a line of greeting cards; both are in international distribution.

About 50 percent of the income I earn is on commissioned paintings – portraits of families, portraits of homes, special paintings for special occasions. I also do design work, and I have a commission now doing 60 paintings for a resort. In 2009 I'm going to create a fabric line, and I'm going to produce a series of DVDs in which I teach the business of art. I'm going to market them online and through library systems.

I want always to be progressive and forward thinking in my career. I see myself as an artist for the people. I don't care whether I ever hang in a museum. People aren't buying my art because I'm the world's greatest artist. But I'm good at what I do, I'm very sincere, and my heart is in it all the time. Through my artwork, I'm telling a story, and people who like it come back to hear more.

~As told to Woody Westlake