

Drawing on experience

Grandmother latches on to art for life



The 60-year-old artist says she views old age optimistically, as reflected in this painting of a woman enjoying her memories.

By Judith Berne
staff writer

Shirley Sloane views painting as her ticket to life for her senior years.

The 60-year-old Farmington Hills grandmother took up oil painting 12 years ago. But it is over the last five years that she has moved from painting as a hobby to striving to become a serious artist.

"I want to be me. I want to enjoy the things that make Shirley happy at this time in my life," Mrs. Sloane says. That involves taking a weekly art class, painting nearly every day and belonging to art groups such as the Farmington Artists Club and most recently the area-wide Palette and Brush Club.

As her four children grew up and left home, Mrs. Sloane although an active volunteer, faced the traditional empty nest syndrome. "I had to do something. I couldn't clean my house seven days a week," she recalls.

On a trip to northern Michigan with an artist friend, she discovered oil painting after "having painted only walls and furniture" in the past, she says with a laugh.

She located a teacher in 1970 and began painting one day a week. She followed that up with classes at the Farmington Community Center, Oakland Community College and from several local teachers.

ALTHOUGH SHE IS currently experimenting in abstract art, she prefers to paint in a realistic style.

"I love realism, and the look of serenity," Mrs. Sloane says. "My eyes act as a camera, recording shapes, col-

ors, different values. I try to send a message of what I have experienced to others who view my paintings.

"No artist is richer than his own experiences. I try to put on canvas a poem with motion."

Mrs. Sloane's father was George S. Morrow, featured as the "Hoosier poet" on radio stations CKLW and WMBZ some years back.

Mrs. Sloane claims she didn't inherit her dad's writing skills.

"Perhaps this is my poetry on canvas." Mrs. Sloane's works are currently featured in the artist of the month display at the Farmington Community Library on Liberty Street.

Among the still lifes, landscapes and portraits displayed is a painting of an old woman seated in a rocking chair. It appears to reflect Mrs. Sloane's philosophy of old age collected from years of hospital volunteer work, watching her own parents age and the course she has set for her own life.

INSPIRATION FOR the picture came from a magazine photograph of an old woman in dirty clothing and shabby surroundings looking bleakly out a window at the world.

In her painting, Mrs. Sloane has altered the view to show a tidily dressed woman in a room with "nice wall paper and clean curtains" remembering the past and finding pleasure in it.

"You don't have to be old and destitute," Mrs. Sloane insists. "There's so much you can do. You can be a hospital volunteer or a foster grandmother."

"I want to be a young senior citizen. Painting is my incentive."



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Karen Morris

Lil' Miss Michigan moves to town

The nine-year-old youngster who holds the title of Little Miss Michigan has recently moved into Farmington Hills, says she had a good transition into her new school, and is now in the throes of getting ready for the competition she'll face in vying for the national title.

When Mr. and Mrs. Dan Morris moved into town they moved a virtual closet-full of trophies with them; all won by their daughter Karen since her first try in modeling competition at the age of 3.

"She never had a lesson," Ginny Morris said of her daughter. "She's won on the traits the judges must have been looking for; someone who could carry on a decent conversation, someone who could express themselves well, polite, someone who came across well on stage."

Karen doesn't compete in the talent divisions of the North American Pageant System she's been associated with for most of her life, preferring to zero in on the modeling aspect. Even so, she, hauled her way into first place in the

only talent contest she ever entered last spring and walked away with \$150 for the effort.

THE HIGH fashion modeling that seems to have come naturally for Karen, who entered Woodcreek Elementary School a few weeks ago, has brought her into the finals and earned her numerous runner-up titles over the past six years.

Her state title has brought her into a round of public appearances and parades interspersed with working out new routines for the national competition, studying models on TV and in fashion shows, keeping an eye out for detailing and accessorizing.

"Her job is to show the detailing of every outfit she's wearing," Mrs. Morris said. "She can do this now while retaining her hair into different styles on stage. We work together on her outfits, but she's the one who puts her routine together and does her own accessorizing."

For her runway appearance, which calls for a party dress, her mother

says, "This is no little summer cotton. These kids are in crinolines and ruffles and laces and hoops, very formal. No kid would wear any other place except on stage."

Since her move into the area, Mrs. Morris has commissioned Margo, who makes custom-designed children's wear in Chatham Square, to design Karen's dress for the national competition.

In May, the Morris family will be in Louisville, Ky., when Karen gives up her state title to Little Miss Michigan 1981-82.

MRS. MORRIS said she has never had any trouble getting sponsors for her daughter's round of pageants.

"When we lived in Lapeer we had sponsors coming in. One merchant in town has 17 trophies in his store because Karen won one, the sponsor gets one."

"Maintaining a wardrobe hasn't been hard. We all switch and trade," she said, speaking of the many friends she has made with the families of, other

contestants.

"Every time Karen goes into competition we might be car-pooling with another contestant or sharing a hotel room with someone new. We've all enjoyed it."

Included in the foursome that travels to competitions is Karen's older sister Kim, a 13-year-old newcomer to Warner Middle School.

"Kimmy is a hockey playing, soccer playing blue-jeaned teen who doesn't give a second thought to fashion," Mrs. Morris said. "But she's also Karen's number one rooster."

As to Karen's future, Mrs. Morris cites many of the youngsters she's met in competition as having successful modeling careers. But she is reluctant about contacting a modeling agency.

"Modeling kid's clothes, maybe. But not that high-fashion stuff they're doing with the 12-13 year olds today. That's sadly."

"We are all enjoying what we're doing now tremendously and we want it to stay that way."

or weeks afterward.

• Encourage the child to express feelings and share your own. Cry together. Give the child an opportunity to give you comfort.

• HAMMOND BELIEVES that it is important for children to attend the funeral, to observe other people mourning and to be able to talk about the death as openly and comfortably as possible.

"When we express anger or grief, some people may try to be helpful by saying, 'You shouldn't feel that way.' What we really need is to have our emotions accepted," she stresses.

"There is also an impulse to protect and shelter the child from the reality of death. Yet it is important to realize children have very real fears that should not be suppressed, such that some behavior of theirs made the a parent ill, or that no one may be around to take care of them."

"A death in the family is always a painful experience," Hammond said. "Especially tragic is the death of a young parent. The remaining spouse, involved in his or her own grief, as well as the many arrangements and readjustments, may find it difficult to be available and helpful. Yet the child's need for the parent during this time will perhaps never be greater."

Stepfamilies can work out

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

Families are all very different. And merging them into a stepfamily can be tricky.

Making the transition easier for area couples is the goal of the Stepfamily Association of Michigan-Oakland County (SAMO).

"If you think of a stepfamily as a merger — two organizations coming together — you can imagine the many difficulties," explained Elaine Horigian-Smith, one of SAMO's founders.

"People need to realize the problems are not because of their inadequacy, but because a stepfamily is such a complicated structure." Founded by two professional therapists — both members of stepfamilies — the nonprofit organization tackles issues like conflicts with ex-spouses and children.

Through self-help meetings, adults share concerns and discuss solutions to common problems.

"Grandma didn't live in this kind of family," explained Ms. Horigian-Smith, an Avon Township clinical psychologist who became aware of stepfamilies have common problems only after marrying into one.

"There are no guidelines and a myriad of negative myths."

ALTHOUGH divorce is common today, the therapist said many stepfamilies still hesitate to "identify themselves."

"Society still views stepfamilies as odd," believes Ms. Horigian-Smith. "People are threatened by divorce; it destroys the myth of monogamy. So stepfamilies tend to feel odd, weird."

Accepting that they are different is one of the biggest hurdles for stepfamilies. SAMO urges them to "come out of the closet" and begin to talk about their common problems.

One of the biggest is having realistic expectations when merging two families, said Ms. Horigian-Smith. Instead of assuming the transition will be smooth, couples blending two families should assume there will be problems.

"Stepfamilies are born of loss. The kids have lost an important biological parent, adults have lost a primary relationship and even single adults lose their single status," explained Ms. Horigian-Smith.

Stepfamilies often face problems with ex-spouses, money trouble and legal hassles, as well as difficulties with children. Visitation makes it necessary for youngsters to move in and out of the family circle.

"Most problems with children will be at the time of remarriage — not divorce," said Ms. Horigian-Smith. "Most children carry the fantasy that the original family will get back together. With remarriage, that myth is destroyed and the children fall apart."

"YOU MARRY the adult and also the children — and are supposed to love everyone equally," said Bonnie Patrick, chairperson of children's programs and services for SAMO.

"Everything is supposed to be like the Brady Bunch." Although she has a master's degree in guidance and counseling, Ms. Patrick was surprised to find that she and her daughter and her husband and his daughter didn't all adjust immediately to each other.

"I raised my daughter and am very comfortable with her, but my stepdaughter was raised very differently," recalled the therapist. "Children are kind of molded or bonded by the particular people they live with."

"You're supposed to love someone else's pre-programmed child instantly and that child is supposed to love you. It's unrealistic," said the Troy resident.

WHILE STEPFAMILIES encounter many hurdles, there are also some advantages to blended families.

The number of relatives grows, offering support. "It's like an extended family," said Ms. Horigian-Smith.

For children of broken homes, the remarriage can be a real plus. "Seeing their parents interact in a healthy relationship is a good role model," said Ms. Patrick. "The relationship between adults can serve as something very healthy for kids."

Part of a national to aid stepfamilies, SAMO offers "survival" classes by Ms. Horigian-Smith and group vice president Constance Stephenson, a social worker. The 12-hour weekend sessions are devoted to stepparenting education.

Group goals include children's programs, a lecture series and panel discussions.

Association meetings are held four times a year, with the next one planned for 7:30 p.m. May 18 in Bloomfield Hills Academy, 1050 E. Square Lake, Bloomfield Hills. For more information, call secretary Donna Davenport at 588-3420.

"The problems aren't all that difficult," said Ms. Horigian-Smith. "It's knowing what the problems might be and planning ahead."

What do you tell kids when mom dies?

The children stood by quietly and impassively as their father registered them for elementary school. After walking them to their new classrooms, he approached school counselor Janice M. Hammond.

"Their mother died last week," he told her with some hesitation. "I don't want anyone at school to mention it. But I thought you should know in case they seemed upset."

"They seem to be adjusting quite well," he went on. "Neither has cried or even talked about her."

"Was it a long illness?" Hammond asked, thinking perhaps the children had been well prepared for the loss.

"No," he replied. "It was a suicide."

"I was skeptical at once about the 'good adjustment,'" relates Hammond, a consultant for the Wayne County Intermediate School District and a post-doctoral student at the University of Michigan. "It is important for bereaved people to mourn, to express their emotions, especially in such a crisis situation."

She convinced the young father to discuss this wife's death and his sadness with the children. To make it easier for them, she searched for a comforting book about death that the three could read together. But she could find nothing in print for young children on the death of a parent.

SO, WORKING with the family, Hammond developed her own picture book, "When My Mommy Died." As she read it to the children, they began to talk more openly about their own feelings and fears.

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read aloud and discussed by a caring adult.

THE BOOK has been well received by educators and school counselors, Hammond says.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, author of "On Death and Dying," wrote: "I loved your book because it encourages and helps children to cry and scream and express their anger without feeling guilty, which is very much my own philosophy. I hope that people who work with bereaved children will use it."

In the preface of the book, Hammond points out some of the steps adults can take to help their child:

• As soon as possible after the death, set aside time to gently, yet truthfully, tell the child about it. Choosing a familiar room or outdoor setting to talk may make the child feel more comfortable.

• Be truthful. Don't make up stories that will have to be changed later. Even learning that the parent died as the result of a homicide, suicide or violent accident may be less frightening for the child than leaving the details to his or her imagination.

• Don't overexplain, however, burdening the child with more information than he or she is ready for. Children need a logical explanation, but they may not want more details until days