

Inspiring Landscapes: Father follows daughter into artistic world

By Jennifer Babulsky

Susan Nicholas Gephart of Bellefonte, is posing by her fathers "Hitlon Head Marina" as part of "Landscape Passages: The Works of Susan Nicholas Gephart and Thomas C. Nicholas Jr." The exhibit is on display at Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art at Loretto through June 3. Thomas C. Nicholas Jr. is Gephart's father.

It's often a parent that teaches a child how to hone a craft, but in the case of Susan Nicholas Gephart and her father, Thomas C. Nicholas Jr., it was the other way around.

While he's always had a fondness for art, it wasn't until after he retired from Philadelphia Electric Co. in 1985 after 43 years that Nicholas had more time to devote to his painting, with his established artist daughter guiding him along the way.

Both are landscape artists, Nicholas using pastels and Gephart using both pastels and oil.

"From a young age, I was doing pencil drawings and watercolors, things like that," Nicholas, 80, said. "I never took any classes. I bought different art books and studied the books and used them as a guide. Then I developed my own ways of doing things."



When he retired, Nicholas and his wife, Betty Jane, spent winters in Hilton Head, S.C., and summers near Bellefonte where Susan and her family lives. His son, Dave, gave him an easel and Gephart offered her encouragement, prompting Nicholas to start seriously doing pastel painting in 1986.

He rode a motorcycle through central Pennsylvania and photographed many of the places he later painted.

He's been in several regional juried exhibits and received an award in the late 1980s from Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art's Artists in Our Midst exhibition, and he's shown with Gephart through the Bellefonte Historical and Cultural Association.

Gephart, 49, has worked for more than two decades coordinating exhibits for the Bellefonte Historical and Cultural Association, served on the board of directors of the Art Alliance of Central Pennsylvania, donated to The Clearwater Conservancy, is a member of Centre County Farmland



Trust and Farmland Preservation Artists and is vice president of Central Pennsylvania Pastel Society. She's also taught through Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, teaches private lessons in her home studio and organizes artist retreats and workshops at Hameau Farm Studio in Belleville.

Nicholas and his wife now live in Salisbury, Md. But his memories of Bellefonte and his time in the area are captured in 20 pieces featured in the 60-piece exhibition "Landscape Passages: The Works of Susan Nicholas Gephart and Thomas C. Nicholas Jr." at SAMA at Loretto. The exhibition runs through June 3. The remaining 40 pieces were done by Gephart.

With the exhibition meant to chronicle the artistic journey Nicholas and Gephart have taken together over the past 20 years, Nicholas couldn't be prouder. Instead of focusing on his own talent, he would much rather talk about his favorite artist, his daughter.



"I've seen work in some of these magazines and it doesn't compare to some of the things she does," he said. "She's a great artist. My thought is she's doing what I always wanted to do. I always wanted to be a well-known artist, but I figured it was too late to really get into it. She seems to be doing it and I want to help her anyway I can, and she's helping me."

Gephart's exhibited with Pastel Society of America and, in 1999, won Best In Show at the Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts.

She also sponsors a high school memorial scholarship each year in honor of David M. Hopkins, a fellow landscape painter and friend who died in a tractor accident in November 2002, one month after Gephart had a confirmed solo exhibit at SAMA. Gephart was on the tractor with Hopkins when it flipped over and as a result of the accident had a crushed pelvis and had to learn to walk again.

Now a few years later, she gets to exhibit with her father and honor not just her father, but her dear friend.

"I focused on my family and my art to make my cup full and make me feel strong," she said about recovering from the accident. "I'm alive and strong and flourishing. I'm right where I want to be with my family and my art."

Gephart has been married to her husband, Ray, for the past 27 years and has three children — Nicholas, 23, Jamie, 17, and Kaitlyn, 15. As she balances her art, tutoring and volunteer opportunities with her family, she thinks back to her own childhood with her parents and five brothers in a 200-year-old farmhouse near Valley Forge.

"I hiked a lot in the woods and wrote poetry, sketched and painted," she said. "We also went camping a lot, which creates a comfortable feeling of the outdoors."

A sense of peace and beauty has worked its way into her paintings since those first hikes in the woods.

“The thing that captures me most is the continual change of the land,” she said. “Although land may be familiar, there’s always something inspirational about it.”

Her landscapes can be seen at Etcetera, Etc. in Bellefonte, Faustina’s in Lewisburg, Langman Gallery in Willow Grove and Waterline Galleries in Berlin, Md., as well as on her Web site — www.snicholasart.com. With her art resume comes a strong educational background in art, including an associate’s degree in art from Montgomery County Community College in 1977 and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Penn State University in 1979.



Her father’s art education came by a different route. He said he left high school at 16 to go work for Philadelphia Electric. At 18, he was drafted into the Army. After basic training, he was sent to Texas and enlisted in the Air Force, and after going through photography training, became an Air Force photographer.

Then it was off to Panama for a year to help guard the Panama Canal, and then it was back to work at the electric company. He was put in the company’s Hall of Fame last year.

Now that he’s been able to add “exhibiting artist” to his resume, Nicholas has helped to bring something unique to SAMA, said Travis Mearns, SAMA public relations coordinator.

“It’s a family exhibition and we don’t get the opportunity to often do that,” he said. “It’s nice a father and daughter can exhibit together and are still here with their family and friends to see it together.”

Another unique aspect Mearns finds appealing is while Nicholas remains a major inspiration for Gephart, it was Gephart that pursued art professionally.

“It puts a different spin on it,” he said.