

Life of an Artist by Tom Lavis

Bellefonte woman recovers from injuries to show works with father.

Susan Nicholas Gephart's latest exhibit could be considered bittersweet.

The Bellefonte artist has collaborated with her 80-year-old father, Thomas C. Nicholas Jr., to mount "Landscape Passages: A Father and Daughter Retrospective" at the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art in Loretto, Cambria County.

The show was originally scheduled for 2002, but a tragic farm tractor accident left a fellow artist dead and Gephart seriously injured.

David Hopkins, a landscape painter, left behind a teenage daughter. Gephart now sponsors a student scholarship and mentor program in his name during the May Hameau Farm Studio Artist Retreat in Belleville, Mifflin County.

Gephart's injuries required eight surgical screws to help hold her shattered pelvis together, but that didn't deter her from continuing her work. A mother of three children, Gephart had faced challenges before in life and knew the best way to heal was to continue with a focus on her love of painting and family.



"I began painting before I left the hospital with a small watercolor set," she said. "It was a gift of encouragement from a friend."

Some of the works in the exhibition were painted with the help of crutches on Gephart's back porch and at a friend's cabin in the woods at Curtin Hollow.

After a lengthy recovery, and a second visit from museum curator, Graziella Marchicelli, "Landscape Passages: A Father and Daughter Retrospective" started to come together in 2003.

During the second visit, Marchicelli invited Gephart and her father to the exhibit. The exhibition of 60 paintings is on view through June 3 at the museum's Margery Wolf-Kuhn balcony gallery.

"This exhibit is a dream come true for me," Gephart said. "My father always encouraged me to paint. As a team, we have inspired each other as creative spirits throughout all the passages in our lives."

The exhibit is not Gephart's first experience with the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art. In 1986, she exhibited at the museum's Johnstown location and was part of its Arts in Education program. The museum then purchased "Warmth of Winter" for its permanent collection. The idea of the exhibit is "about teaching the public the creative arts are not just part of the museum but a part of life as well," Gephart said.



Gephart's father and mother spent their summers outside Bellefonte for 20 years, but they now reside in Maryland. Her father was such an influence that she honored him by keeping his name as part of hers.

This retrospective exhibition features pastels, oils and mixed media works created during the past 20 years, as well as many new compositions by each artist.

She reflects on memories of family travels, distinct musical interests of her five brothers, and growing up in an old farmhouse nestled in the woods as catalysts. These influences have fostered her appreciation for adventure, discovery and the environment - all three aspects very visible in and consequential to her career as an artist, she said.

Gephart's favorite mediums are oils and pastels, but she said her father is strictly a pastel man.

"He is somewhat of an elitist when it comes to his love of the pastel medium," she said.

He would photograph central Pennsylvania views and architectural landmarks while on long motorcycle rides and then would later use the photos in his studios, she said. Other works reflect on memories and his winter retirement home in Hilton Head, S.C. Nicholas has 20 works in the show, while his daughter has 40, three-quarters of which have been painted in the past year.

Gephart's landscape paintings capture the forests, woodland creeks, mountains, and open sky vistas of central Pennsylvania.

She says her father began creating art later in life, although he always showed glimpses of talent while raising his family and working full time. Upon her father's retirement in the mid-1980s, after 43 years of service with Philadelphia Electric Co., Nicholas began pastel painting, and later, exhibiting alongside his daughter.

He doesn't realize how good he is," said Gephart, who is a professional artist teaches pastel and oil painting, and also organizes artist retreats and workshops at Hameau Farm Studio.

He attributes his artistic success to a background as a draftsman, years of observation, self-study, and valuable advice in pastel painting given by his daughter.

Gephart is a well-known artist whose work has been exhibited and collected extensively. She has been painting landscapes for more than 30 years as a way of promoting environmental awareness and expressing her love of the land, water, and sky.

"The earth is kind of a reverent thing that we need to care for and protect it," she said, noting that she can show that through her painting.

Her appreciation of the earth can be seen in impressionistic pastels and oils, mostly painted "en plein air," a French expression meaning "in the open air" She thinks working on location outdoors allows for spontaneity and directness.

"Responding to the sound, smell and light of the environment influences each interpretation creating a unique experience and result," she said.

Her works are included in the permanent collections of The Penn Stater Conference Center Hotel, Penn College, and Lock Haven University and the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art.

Gephart has worked for more than 20 years coordinating exhibits for the Bellefonte Historical and Cultural Association, instructed pastel classes and served on the boards of the Art Alliance of Central Pennsylvania.

Because her father will be unable to attend the exhibit in Loretto, Gephart plans to involve her teen girls and husband in a video documentary film they will create together.

The documentary will include photographs from different visits to the exhibit and will hopefully feature an interview with her father about his art



and painting. Gephart said. She plans to share the film not only with her parents but with the museum's education department.

IF YOU GO

The museum is located on the campus of St. Francis University, Loretto.

Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays and 1 to 5 p.m. weekends.

The museum is open to the public and admission is free.

Information: 472-3920 or visit www.same-art.org. or www.snicholasart.com

Assistant City Editor Shannon Kolkedy contributed to this report.