

A lifelong love affair with art



By Jenn Watt

Sonny Cook riffles through the back seat of her car looking for her notes and some food ahead of her lunch hour interview with the newspaper. There are bags and papers in front seat and back ? a symptom of a life full of hustle and bustle. She has been modeling for Brian Smith's Portrait Sketching and Development class at Haliburton School of the Arts and the clock is ticking before she has to get back.

This course is taught at the high school, so Sonny parks close to the cafeteria to make it easier to catch a bite on her way in. Dressed in a long, pink summer dress, and wooden beaded necklace with her braided hair tied in a stylish side ponytail, she is everything you'd expect in a HSTA student. Maybe she's got the look down because she's been at the college for 28 years. Cook, 86, has been studying art in Haliburton since 1987. In that time, she's taken some 70 courses, earned a Visual and Creative Arts Diploma and made an impressive list of friends of fellow students and faculty.

You couldn't call art a hobby, or even a passion, for the longtime student. Rather, it seems to radiate from her. She is not only thinking about her artwork and what next to paint or write, but how she can make that action even more integrated with her life and with the lives of those around her.

?I'm an RN,? she says, sitting on the bleachers beside the football field. ?After I'd worked as an RN for a long time, I'd started doing life skills work. In nursing, you get them [patients] better and they get sick again, but with life skills I could help people ... and change their whole lives.?

For a while, that is what Cook did. She initially came to Haliburton to head a life skills program for Fleming College.

?But I realized in art you could help people emotionally straight from the emotional base,? she says.

As she talks about her life, Cook shuffles through a folder filled with resumes and reproductions of her artwork and photos of her life. With one hand she grabs a handful of greeting cards she's had printed with colour reproductions of her paintings ? many of them of turtles and landscapes ? with the other she holds her lunch: a cream cheese sandwich on a hot-crossed bun.

Cook's eyes have the mischievous gleam of a young child and she punctuates almost every statement with a soft, genuine laugh.

?I ran away to sea at the age of six in a tugboat in the harbour,? she says. ?They found me drinking coffee and eating doughnuts with the tugboat captain.?

Perhaps that was an indication of things to come. Sonny married George Cook, who was in the navy, and spent many years living by the ocean or on the water itself.

Out of her wallet, she pulls a worn photo of a sailboat. It's the one she built with George when they lived in Nova Scotia. The pair ran a company chartering the boat in that province and the Bahamas for 10 years.

?When he [George] came out of the navy, he was threatening to go to the West Coast and my mom found him this house ... near Bancroft,? she says. George passed away nearly three decades ago, but Sonny still lives in the Bancroft area. She divides her time between places on Stoney Lake, Bancroft and Florida.

While the couple lived in Nova Scotia, Sonny took a watercolour course, which she loved, but didn't do art again until she came to

the college. She seems to be making up for lost time.

From stone carving to colour theory to expressive arts, Cook has tried her hand at most things and counts several esteemed artists among her mentors and friends including Harold Klunder, Peter Kolisnyk, John McKinnon and John Leonard.

Lately, she has been focusing on the turtle in her work with an alabaster piece nearing completion and several paintings over the years.

She recalls the first time the notion came to her: "I was walking up to my cabin north of Bancroft. And these words came in my head: "old mama turtle coming to lay her eggs." Those words stuck with her as the turtle emerged as a theme in her work, though her art is quite diverse.

"I'm criticized for not having a body of work," she says as she shuffles through her greeting card collection, each sheet different in styles from pointillist to abstract expressionist to impressionist.

And then she laughs that punctuating laugh. "I just paint how I feel."