

Career Profiles

A Fish Out of Water

By Carter Hammett

Driving up the 118 highway near Haliburton, it's easy to miss Sue Forbes' studio. Tiny sea creatures dangle from a mailbox and a small painted sign posts the words, "Fish out of Water."

The sign doesn't lie. For this is the art the former Toronto fundraiser creates: fish. Carved wooden trout sit in mounted frying pans hanging on a wall. Tiny schools of minnows appear in and out of brilliantly-coloured glass. Other fish are transmogrified from driftwood. The work is almost like living art. Look at one of Forbes' patented windows, complete with pebbles and sea grass, long enough, and it appears as if her carved marine life actually moves through the scenery.

"Fish balance their ecosystems a lot better than people do," Forbes snaps. "Clean water's important to me. We take it for granted. Nobody said 'hello' to it as an issue until Walkerton."

It's hard to believe the 59-year-old Forbes only embarked on her artistic path a little more than four years ago, and for the past two years she's actually been making a living at it.

"I took a stained glass course five years ago, and my teacher said, "Your piece is very good, but a stained glass artist you're not. You're a stained glass junkie." She was right. I was awkward at it, but it was an important piece of education for me and taught me the beauty of glass."

A year later, Forbes found herself carving driftwood when she realized she was actually creating an animal emerging from the wood. Fascinated by the medium, she continued mining the possibilities of wood and glass, often combining the two, until her work began to take on the haunting accuracy of the images she was trying to capture.

"It's pain-staking, meticulous work," she says, "but I owe my customers an accurate study; I try to bring life to my art." She laughs when recalling how some customers occasionally mistake her work for taxidermy.

Although her work is displayed in several galleries, Forbes estimates that sixty five per cent of her work comes from commissions, noting how she's currently got seven projects vying for completion in time for the gift giving season.

Her work goes through several phases before it reaches completion. Forbes will often visit a client's home to determine size, design, colours and themes before commencing a piece. Sometimes clients have particular requests, such as fish designs on kitchen cabinets. Normally though, she says her clients trust her judgment enough to say, "go."

She estimates that once the design and conceptual stages are complete, a piece will take up to two full days to finish. The completed product ranges in price from \$50 to \$2000. "My price points are all dependent on the amount of materials and creativity involved," she says. "When people come into their homes, I want them to love the art."

Part of Forbes' success is built on a strong marketing foundation, cultivated over more than two decades during her career as a "business barracuda," she laughs.

"For an artist's survival, you're not just an artist until you're (Robert) Bateman," she insists. "You have to be it all: sign maker, ad writer, everything. You just can't take a magic marker sign outside and create attention."

A graduate from Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in business administration, Forbes says the most important aspect of her education was learning what she didn't like. "Even though I was okay at business, it was an important part of becoming who I wasn't," she says.

So, after years of commuting between Newmarket and Toronto, she finally threw in the towel and moved to Haliburton three years ago, establishing a home on Grace Lake. "After years of dragging the kids down the 404, the city started to grind me down. Being in Haliburton is a tremendous energy booster."

Still, she hasn't left her roots completely behind her. Forbes recently joined the local arts council, whose mandate in part, is to help artists market their work. It's all part of giving back to the community, which she feels is important.

"I'm coming very late in life to art. I feel thankful to grasp art. So many never find their buzz when they retire; I'm lucky enough to have found mine and now I'm making up for lost years."

For more information, call Fish Out of Water at (705) 457-8322 or e-mail: sueforbes@sympatico.ca

Toronto writer Carter Hammett can be reached at journalist4hire@yahoo.com

January 2009