

Burning passion

Written by Kristina Medley

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Even when local artist Nedra Denison was at odds with art, she never lost her talent for it.

Kristina Medley-News-Bulletin photo: Nedra Denison, of Belen, demonstrates pyrography on a piece of wood she said had character and was meant to take the shape of a mountain lion.

"(Art) just never left me," Denison said, "It was always in my blood. I've just been evolving over the years."

Denison grew up in New England, but the Southwestern culture has always been a part of her. She has lived in the Southwest for more than 20 years, the past three in Belen.

"(Moving to the Southwest) was the first time in my life that I felt like I belonged," she said. "I started Native American art back then, and it just stuck with me."

Denison mainly focuses on pyrography, the art of burning designs. Her media are wood and gourds. Many of Denison's burnings feature designs such as the Navajo bear and turtle, dream catchers and portraits of people who live on the reservation.

She has won more than 30 first-place ribbons and other awards for her pyrography, including Best of Show for her wood burning of a golden eagle.

Denison started burning on gourds, most of which she grows in her garden, about three years ago. Denison said some of her art pieces, such as the lifelike wood burning of a rose that is displayed in her living room, are inspired by her love for gardening.

But Denison and art were not always such friendly companions. She suffered from burnout and did not work on art of any kind for many years, and it was during that time that she gave up painting, which she started at age 6, completely.

Denison said before she got to the point where she could do art again, she had a therapy dog named Max.

It was at that point that she realized more people were in need of Max's therapy, so she took the golden retriever to a hospice in Texas where he was a companion to a blind woman who had previously refused to have companionship with anyone. When the woman died, Denison said Max went directly to her casket and gently kissed her arm.

After that emotional experience, Denison said she knew she wanted to be more involved with animal therapy. She founded Angel Paws, a nonprofit organization dedicated to pet therapy in hospitals, when she lived in Texas.

She said she plans to do more animal therapy with her new companion, Shadow, in Belen in the coming months. She said her passion for art and animals has given her joy.



"A dog's unconditional love is just amazing," Denison said. "It gets you past all your fears and insecurities. You forget it all."

Denison said her parents have also been an inspiration to her.

"They've always nurtured my art, since I was a little kid doodling," she said.

Denison said her parents encouraged her to paint portraits when she was 13-years old, but she did not like it, and she refused. Denison said when she started wood burning about 10 years ago, she burned a portrait of Mel Gibson, a work featured in her first book.

"I know my parents are looking down on me saying, 'See, I told you you could do portraits,'" she said.

Denison said she got into wood burning mostly because of her husband, Alan, who has won awards for his woodcarvings.

"We both have interests in wood, totally different interests," Denison said.

Denison created a website, www.sawdustconnection.com, which originally served to exhibit Alan's art. The site now offers information on everything from choosing a pyrography pattern, to purchasing tools, to Nedra and Alan's retirement.

Denison said while taking a wood carving class at a show, a group of people sitting next to her were wood burning, and she liked the smell so much that she decided to experiment with pyrography.

It was also at a show that she was persuaded to teach pyrography, something she had never before considered.

Denison said one of her greatest joys in her art was when one of her students earned blue ribbons for his pyrography. The student also went on to teach wood burning classes, she said.

"I think it's wonderful, because something I did helped him to find his passion," Denison said. "I can't turn somebody into an artist. (It's up to the student) to take what they learn and grow."

Denison is the author of four books: "Lifelike Pyrography from Photographs," "Pyrography 101: A Life Lesson in Wood Burning," "Pyrography Patterns" and "The Art of Pyrography: Taking Wood Burning to New Limits." She wrote the first book because she realized there were people who wanted to attend her classes but were unable to do so.

"I loved wood burning so much, I liked sharing it," she said.

Denison said she encourages aspiring artists not to take themselves too seriously and to let their heart guide them.

"Art is not in the head, it's in the heart," she said. "It can't be work, it has to be fun."

Three of Denison's gourds are featured in the Harvey House exhibit in Belen.

For information about Denison's work with animals and art, classes she offers, or to purchase wood burning supplies, visit www.sawdustconnection.com.