

DODIE HRUBY, THE FAMILY ARTIST

My mother, Dodie Reeder Hruby, recently turned eighty years old. To celebrate her beautiful life, my two siblings and I hosted a family reunion and a catered art show displaying some of her original oil paintings in the main hall of Patriot's Colony.

During the art exhibit, Pat Farnsworth asked me to write some funny stories about what life was like growing up with an artist as a mother. The initial request caught me off guard because the funniest thing I could think of was that I didn't "grow up as the child of an artist." My mother didn't start painting until she retired after 30 years of teaching English and Creative Writing, 20 years of which was at Lake Braddock Secondary School in Fairfax County. By then, I'd gotten married and had left home.

The truth is, my mother's only artistic claim to fame had been winning a finger-painting contest in the fourth grade. So, initially I thought I'd have to decline the request because I had no silly stories about spilled paint on our clothes, frenzied bursts of artistic production, or sleepless nights of creativity.

But as I reminisced about my childhood, I got to thinking about my mother's artistic skills and abilities and how they really transcended every layer of her life! Her talents have been blended into everything she touched for as long as I can remember, but her artistic talents had just been camouflaged as other things. Then I laughed out loud – I was raised by an artistic chameleon! My mother has an artistic soul. She's spent a lifetime being creative. Initially in her youth, her talents were directed towards more physical skills. She had been a ballet dancer and instructor, a performing figure skater, an actress in the theater arts, plus a playwright and director in college. In the Frankfurt American Middle School, she landed a job as an English teacher because she agreed to be the Drama teacher as well, putting on "Oklahoma" and "South Pacific."

She's always had an eye for balance and design as demonstrated through hundreds of museum quality flower arrangements created for family gatherings and church altars.

She's expressed her flair making clothes and mending just about anything. She wraps gifts with skillful and loving joy. Her home is filled with eclectic items, reflecting her appreciation of line and design. Even her handwriting is uniquely hers. 13

Never daunted by trying a new skill, my mom once created a Christmas tree using wire mesh, pine cones, gum balls and gold spray paint. Even cooking and dressing offer yet more outlets for her artistic bent. So, by now I guess you're wondering when did Dodie learn to paint? How did she get to be so talented with oils? To a large degree, my father, Dale, gets the credit. After many years of hearing my mother wistfully say, "If I had a magic wand, I'd be an oil painter," one Christmas after she had retired from teaching, my father surprised her with an easel, oil paints, brushes, and a canvas. He said he wouldn't go to bed that night until she painted SOMETHING!

After much protesting, bemoaning that she didn't know how to paint, she proceeded to produce her first free-hand creation – a lovely image of nature filled with flowers and trees. Art classes followed. She started by trying to copy the works of famous artists. One such painting was a basket of what she thought were "oranges" by Edouard Manet. Only later did she discover that Manet had labeled his painting not oranges, but "Strawberries!!!"

After painting numerous still lifes and landscapes, Dodie remarked to her instructor, the talented and professional, Theo Tilton, that she wished she were good enough to paint portraits. Whereupon Theo said, "You'll never know unless you try." Starting by copying a painting found in a Veranda magazine of an angelic child, Dodie gained confidence and embarked upon painting all nine of her grandchildren. Each subject's personality peeped through her strokes of blended oils. Wisely, she decided to paint them all as young children to avoid the inevitable "you made my nose too big" or "my hair looks stupid." They all thought they were adorable as five-year-olds. In fact, the only complaint from any of her grandkids came from the youngest. "Grama Dodie, WHY did you paint me in a DRESS?" (Actually, it was his Great Grandfather's Baptismal gown.)

I never knew it growing up, but we all know it now – my mother is an amazingly artistic chameleon. You might consider me biased, but I believe this to be true. So here's a fair warning to the world – Dodie's only 80 and who knows what sorts of other talents she's kept hidden. I can't wait to see what she does next! I sure do love you, Mommie!

– Taya Hruby Champigny, Dodie's daughter –