It's often said that we each harbor a gift. A talent that we either release and make a life with or we keep dormant, until the time is right. Or until time avails itself. One of Cape Ann's harbored gifts lies within the home studio of retired sea captain Sam Nigro. An artist all his life, although few knew. "I was always painting as a hobby," he says. "My mother made me go to art school on Saturdays—when everybody else was out playing baseball. Drove me crazy," he shares. Little did anybody know that these torturous classes as a tween would evolve into a legacy project.

The voice of a pirate, the soul of a sea captain, the hands of a painter, Nigro embodies them all. His story is one of hard work, solid values and enormous generativity and love for the region. And he paints



Charlene Delaney

## "You want to do something different all the time. That's why it's original."

his story on a rather unique canvas: oars. Everyday boat oars of various lengths and widths. For this grandfather of 14, the fun is found in the process, and while Nigro will scoff when recounting humorous tales of customer interactions ("Do they really know what they want?" he wonders), his dedication to craft and subject is clear. As if his brush were a pen, the oars are "stoaries" if you will, with Nigro as both artist and author. Immortalizing a treasured Cape Ann business, an elusive sunset, the majesty of a lighthouse; each element documents the heart of the region through the eyes of this fisherman and family man.

Nigro's Glostaoars symbolize the community where he has made a home and life with wife Eileen since 1967. What began as a present for a friend's 50th birthday nearly a dozen years ago has become wildly popular. "The only reason why it's so successful is nobody wants to do it," he laughs. "First of all, I can't find oars. Then you gotta be crazy to do it because you go blind," evidenced by the Nigro's attention to detail. While he calls his painting a "hobby," perhaps passion is a more appropriate term. The oars act as messages, command steep fundraiser donations and are offered as special gifts. Recipients include Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker "and a Kennedy."

The process isn't easy—first you have to find the oars. Nigro has friends on the lookout as he scours the Internet and flea markets. There's a priming and careful sanding process yet "you leave the oar rustic," Nigro explains, "That's what they want. They want antique." Once primed, "then you sketch it and you paint it, then you seal it. Then I put a lock on.…[There's] a lot of money tied up in it," Nigro explains, though is quick to add, "[But] I don't want to put it that way. I'm not about money, it's like my epitaph when I'm gone. There's gonna be a lot of oars out there with my name on it. It shows I was here." Nigro was recently commissioned to paint an oar for the *Angela Rose*—the vessel at the center of the film *CODA* which won the 2022 Academy Award for Best Picture—with the hand signs for CODA, children of deaf adults. The oar is for Sian Heder, writer/director of the work that was filmed in Gloucester, Essex and Rockport.

Nigro paints portraits of those who've passed for their families, he paints memories for friends who've moved south; one "wants a memory of Gloucester on her wall in Florida because she's homesick." "People give you images of other places," Nigro continues, "Maybe they've gone to Italy or to other parts of the world, and they give you pictures of faraway places and memories" that for some intuitive reason they know Nigro will capture. "Anybody can paint on a canvas," he says.

Retired for 20 years now, Nigro, at 80, speaks social media with impressive fluency, works his business on Facebook, is Instagram savvy and reps himself well, "Have you visited my website?" he asks. Retirement has availed the time. "Every day is Saturday," he says. "When you retire, you have to have a hobby or a trouble." So Nigro paints in honor of Cape Ann and stays busy. Currently working on at least four oars at press time, Nigro cannot deny the inner artist his mother saw in him all those years ago. "You just want to do something different all the time. That's why it's original." Nigro's original oar still hangs in Destino's Deli in Gloucester, a proud testament to friendship and Cape Ann.