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Bound by love and art

A mother and her twin daughters create in their own ways

KELLY STARLING LYONS, Correspondent

Enter the Raleigh home of artist Carolyn Goodridge and the walls draw you in. Portraits fill the spaces with splashes of color and feeling, creating a silent testimony. Along the staircase, her I Ching-inspired series of acrylic gold and silver leaf paintings beckon.

Steps up, a watercolor portrait of a geisha in the garden by daughter Alexis and a portrayal of the architecture of Santorini, Greece, by daughter Alana come to life.

Art dwells here like a member of the family. It connects Carolyn and her 17-year-old twins, giving them a deeper understanding of one another and a shared passion that strengthens their bond.

"It's satisfying, fulfilling," says Carolyn, who is 45. "It makes me feel even closer to them."

Art has enriched Carolyn's life since childhood. As a teen in Brooklyn, N.Y., she would sit on a front step with a pad and colored pencils and re-create what she saw. A house across the street, a tree, it all became inspiration.

"Colors came natural," she says. "I would see colors, not just one but several colors in one little piece of something."

Drawing relaxed and focused her.

"I tend to have a nervous disposition," says Carolyn, who also explored writing, playing piano and guitar. "I think, 'There's stuff to do, life to live, places to go.' I want to eat up the whole world in one gulp.

"Art helped me focus on the here and now. I saw that if I sat down long enough, I could find something to make me laugh or smile."

Yet as much as she loved art, Carolyn never considered it as a profession. Instead, the daughter of hardworking Caribbean immigrants set her sights on becoming a lawyer. An internship that gave her a taste of the courtroom changed her mind. She explored her options through a summer of classes at Brooklyn College, and later became a word-processing secretary on Wall Street.

By her mid-20s, she had backpacked through



Artist Carolyn Goodridge, center, has shared her love and talent for art to her daughters, Alexis, left, and Alana.
Staff Photo by Leslie Barbour

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Families in Art

The Goodridge family is a local example of how art can inspire and connect a family. Here are some other mother-daughter artists.

THE SCHERRS

Tar Heels Mary Ann (mother) and Sydney (daughter) are internationally known for their goldsmithing, particularly their one-of-a-kind and custom jewelry.

THE SAARS

California resident Betye is known for her mixed-media works that interrogate stereotypes of African-Americans and challenge racial myths. Elder daughter Lezley often uses found objects and scraps of fabrics to depict social outcasts. Alison's sculptures explore African-American and feminine identity and spiritual traditions.

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India and Sri Lanka, had weathered two unsuccessful marriages and was making a good living. But she yearned for something more.

Carolyn thought back to her art and started taking night classes in textile design at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

"I would have a long day at work, but after I finished my class, I had so much energy. I was in my element," she says.

In her late 20s, Carolyn became pregnant. She was six months along and barely showing when she started feeling contractions. In premature labor, she rushed to the hospital. The contractions were stopped, but she stayed there for three weeks.

After 12 hours of labor, on a November morning, her daughter Alexis was born. Two minutes later, Carolyn got a surprise -- a second daughter, Alana.

The babies weighed just 2 and 1 1/2 pounds, respectively.

"I remember putting my hands out and they were exactly the size of my palm," she says, holding out her slender fingers. "That's how small they were."

Alexis and Alana stayed in the hospital for three months, gaining weight bit by bit.

"I would sing and touch them a little," she said. "Their eyes would blink and they'd turn their necks."

After visiting hours, Carolyn headed to her FIT classes. She dreamed of going to college and earning her degree. Carolyn wanted to be a role model for her daughters.

"I had a mission now," she says.

Practical concerns

A year and a half later when Carolyn was accepted at the University of Florida, the twins came with her. They lived in an apartment and made do with the help of food stamps and Medicaid.

Carolyn still battled against her artistic spirit. She had daughters now and thought she needed a practical career. She pursued engineering then premed. Nothing fit. Finally, she followed her heart and majored in painting.

Carolyn juggled taking classes, working as an assistant public art coordinator at the university gallery, and caring for her girls. In the evenings, she worked on her pieces at home instead of the studio. She took her daughters to exhibits on campus, museums and galleries.

"When you separate from your baby so early at birth sometimes there's a bonding issue," Carolyn says. "When they came home, I wanted to include them in everything I did. Everything I loved, I wanted to offer to them."

She soon saw signs that the girls had a special connection to art too.

Alexis, whom Carolyn calls her "cool cucumber," had a fit over a 64-count box of crayons Carolyn could not afford. Alana, she says, would throw temper tantrums if she had a picture in her mind and it didn't come out the way she wanted. "She would take the paper and ball it up, roll on the ground and

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She used art to teach her daughters about dealing with emotions, having patience and gaining self-esteem.

"They had to make decisions like whether to use a crayon, pencil or watercolor," she says. "Little mundane things people take for granted, I used to point toward their own power. I always let them know they can make their own decisions. I showed them art is a metaphor for living."

The girls learned art techniques being around her.

"I remember watching her paint and put up her artwork," Alana says.

"I remember her building her own frames, stretching the canvas over the wood," Alexis says. "I remember her working on the living room floor."

Art was part of their space. It dried in that bathroom and hung on the wall. Pieces-in-progress were around the room.

In elementary school, the girls found they had a gift for art.

"I drew a tree," Alana says. "Some of my classmates came over and said, 'Look at what she has drawn.' It never occurred to me it was a big deal."

Living in North Carolina, where Carolyn worked toward her Master of Fine Art degree at UNC-Chapel Hill, the girls kept learning right along with her. They helped her set up for shows and explored their own styles. Watercolor was her first medium, Alexis says.

Six weeks after graduation, Carolyn and her daughters returned to New York City to be there for her mom, who was diagnosed with uterine cancer. Carolyn returned to the corporate world for several years and nurtured her art when she could.

But that old longing to give art her all came back.

"I got that feeling I had at Wall Street saying, 'This is not at all who I am,' " she said. "I felt this pull to do my artwork, to do more. That's when I came here."

Working together

Today, Carolyn uses her art to express impressions that come to her, like visual music. She's inspired by the elements -- earth, air, wind and fire.

"She has very bold and evocative work," says Eleanor Jordan, president and CEO of the United Arts Council of Raleigh and Wake County where Carolyn is a new board member.

"She has a good balance between being dedicated to her art and knowing that to make it professionally, commercially, you have to put a lot of time into marketing."

To that end, Carolyn runs a special events business called Art Impact. She brings businesses, nonprofits and artists together for charity events.

Linwood Herndon, owner of Raleigh's Hair, Mind and Sole Barbershoppe, featured the work of Goodridge, her daughters and other artists in an art auction and benefit. He says when he first met the Goodridges he didn't realize they were mother and daughters. The girls showed such maturity and seriousness about their art.

"Her daughters were at ease talking about what they'd done, the mediums they used and why some worked better than others," he says. "They came across like colleagues."

Alexis and Alana are seniors at Broughton High School, where they take honors art classes. Alexis uses bright, vibrant color in her work. She likes flowers and gold and silver details. Some pieces show Indian or Japanese influence.

"I like lots of movement and imagination," she says.

Alana enjoys creating animals and architecture. She uses color and motion.

"For me, it was finding my own originality and creativity," Alana says. "Everyone has their own style."

When they get stuck, Carolyn is there to help.

"She offers advice to help us out, help us grow as artists," Alana says.

At home, they often work in their own worlds. Carolyn creates in her basement studio. The girls let their imaginations soar at the glass-topped dining room table.

Mother and daughters come together over more everyday things such as going to the movies, taking walks on nature trails and having picnics at Jordan Lake. Some nights, they lounge on the cozy couches in their second floor sitting room and talk deep into the night about politics, history, art and womanhood.

Carolyn said her girls can be whatever they want. But she knows they'll carry a creative spirit with them.

"They'll have that anchor in everything they do," she said. "Art will be part of their lives forever."

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