

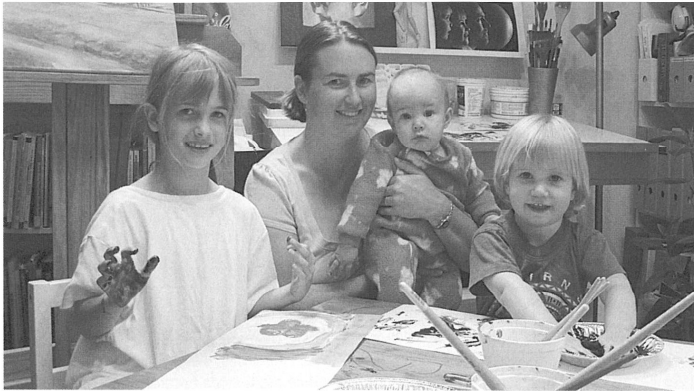
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Being An Artist

Lalita Hamill, AFCA



Family or Career?

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At age 31, I was faced with a key life decision: whether or not to become a full-time professional artist. The circumstances surrounding this decision were traumatic; 6 years ago, my husband Patrick, our daughter, Samera and I were in a car accident that left Patrick with a severe brain injury. He was no longer able to work or complete simple daily activities, and suddenly, I found myself as the sole provider and caregiver.

I thought about my grandfather as a young man starting his family, unable to make enough money as an artist and forced to sideline his passion until he retired. In contrast, my biological father left when I was a baby to pursue a vagrant, frugal lifestyle, with the words "The Wandering Artist" etched on the side of the old school bus he called home. While my grandfather chose his family, my biological father chose his passion. Each man was left with a hole in his heart.

After the accident, I had to come up with a plan that enabled me to be the bread-winner in the family, and the logical option was to return to my position as aquatics manager of a large recreational complex. However, I was not keen on placing one year old Samera in full time daycare and being unable to take care of Patrick. To put my family's needs first, I required highly flexible employment close to home. I didn't see how I could possibly begin a career as a professional artist without losing our house.

I extensively researched my options, we weighed our priorities, and agonized over the "hows." I couldn't figure out how to have a career as an artist and felt overwhelmed. I also believed that I was not enough of a risk-taker to leap into being an artist; passion would not be enough to sustain my professional art career. What if Patrick would never recover? What if I made an attempt at being a professional artist and failed, and then couldn't find work in my previous field?

I had finally realized that I wanted to be an artist, and the idea of having to wait until I retired like my grandfather was too much to bear. So Patrick and I did something that is very difficult for us. We asked for help.

At this point, we were living in a community called WindSong CoHousing. Following a neighbour's advice, we asked WindSongers to attend a creative planning session to help us decide which major life path to take.

The facilitators led us through a series of processes, which began with us telling our stories. Patrick was green with nausea but participated. Within two hours, a large wall had been covered with sticky notes of ideas under key headings such as "income options", "strengths", and "things to sell." I began to see that the "hows" were falling into place. I could apply for a local Self Employment Program, which would cover the cost of our mortgage and strata fees, and I could spend a year learning how to run my own business as an artist. Samera would continue in a small daycare for three days per week. It could work.

I suddenly felt a lump in my throat and realized the real issue: I felt I did not deserve for my life to work out. My biggest, deepest and most debilitating assumption all along was that I did not deserve to have both my family and my art.

A tremendous weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Identifying this issue was the one thing I needed in order to move forward.

With a gut feeling that this would all work out, I began what would be the most challenging and intense six years of my life thus far. They were also the most rewarding.

Once I had shown that my art business was viable, I was accepted into the self-employment program and was immersed in spreadsheets, business planning, bookkeeping, networking, researching, volunteering and marketing. I did anything art-related, some paid, some not. I took on work that pushed my artistic limits and discovered that my clients were especially receptive to my commissioned portraits, teaching, and architectural renderings.

In our relationship, Patrick and I rode the rickety roller coaster called emotional turmoil, each of us in our own coaster car. Though we travelled the same track, often it would split in two and one of us would plunge in frustration, pain fear, and hopelessness, while the other ticked slowly up, hanging on and preparing for the next nosedive. To say this was a tough six years is a gross understatement.

With alternative therapies, Patrick made slow but steady progress in his health. He was able to play with Samera, help around the house, volunteer politically, and even work part time. I had to turn down teaching jobs for lack of time. Things were looking up.

In the last 3 years, we've had two more children, Annie and Ava. I also achieved my AFCA status with the FCA, and currently, I paint, write, volunteer and teach. Patrick is now self-employed full time in a career he loves.

Basically, I'm hooked. I feel that I'm five years into a 50-year art career. I may have started relatively late, and I have a lot to learn, but I'm on the right path. And I am able to do so with my whole heart, and my heart whole.