

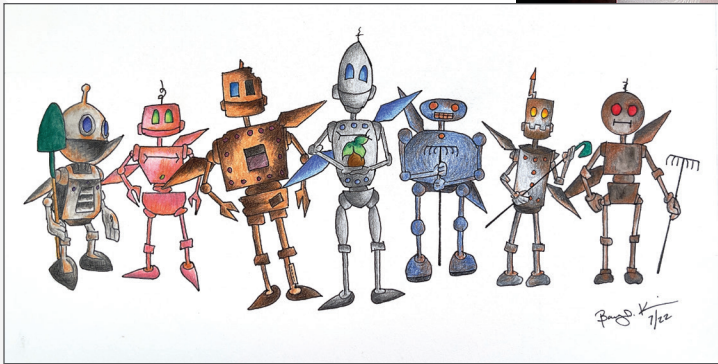
BARRY KIRSCH'S EXTRAORDINARY LIFE:

ARTIST, STORYTELLER, AND GARDENER

BY MARY BOZA CRIMMINS

Life at Restoration Cottage

Artist, storyteller, and master gardener Barry Kirsch doesn't simply reside at Restoration Cottage in Sanford's Historic District; he lives an extraordinary life there. Kirsch shares the 113-year-old house and its whimsical garden with his wife Debbie, cat Misty, and seven fairy robots.



"I've always been a storyteller," states Kirsch. The stories growing in his garden are of fairy robots who know nothing about violence and everything about gardening. Each has a unique personality. None is mean, and all farm in collaboration. Happy-go-lucky Clank was the first fairy robot Kirsch met. There's also Toot, who is deaf and learning American Sign Language, the non-binary Dot, and entomologist Aluma.

Although Clank, Toot, Dot, Aluma, and the other fairy robots live in the garden, you can meet them in Kirsch's e-book *The Fairy Robots of Restoration Garden*. [The book] "allows me to tell stories using everything I know how to do," states Kirsch. "It's a combination of entertainment and learning about history and gardening."

Lillie's Fairies

The concept of fairy robots was born when Kirsch was a young boy. His great-grandmother Lillie introduced him to the realm of fairies. She could coax them out by speaking to them and hearing their thoughts. Whether the encoun-

ters were a product of her imagination is something Kirsch doesn't presume to answer. He just knows that the fairies were her companions. In his short film "The Forever Tea Party," Kirsch creates a captivating and graceful tribute to Lillie and her fairies.

Barry's Art Transformed

Kirsch's experiences with his great-grandmother are in contrast with his profession as a photojournalist. In his over-forty-year career, Kirsch traveled the globe reporting on life's harsher realities like crime and hurricanes. "Drawing was a way to cope with stress," he said.

In 2013, Kirsch suffered a stroke, resulting in his forgetting names, even his wife's, and losing his ability to draw. Frustration mounted as even making a circle was a new skill to master. With determination, encouragement from his wife and her gift of colored pencils, he taught himself how to draw again. "The drawings aren't the high

precision I used to do, and I have to compensate by moving the paper under my pencil," explains Kirsch. However, what was taking a month to draw can now be completed in a few days.

Looking at the vivid drawings in the e-book, one would never think of Kirsch's limitations. Each work of art is several layers utilizing watercolors and colored pencils. The end products are labor- and love-intensive.

Fantasy? Reality? Or Simply Extraordinary?

"I'm at the point now where I just want to enjoy myself," Kirsch states. Yet he continues to convey a selfless ethos: "We can make a difference."

Although Restoration Cottage is only 720-square feet, it is filled with creatures, human and otherwise, who make a difference. Whether you call life at Restoration Cottage fantasy or reality, it is indeed extraordinary. ■