

Around Broadneck: Artist's mural helps soothe trauma, burn patients

By WENDI WINTERS, For The Capital Gazette Published 10/05/09



Wendi Winters — For The Capital

Collin Kassal, 3, points to his favorite fish in a mural painted by his mother, Gayle Mangan Kassal of Cape St. Claire. The mural has been installed in the Pediatric Trauma and Burn Services unit of Children's National Hospital in Washington, D.C.

It's hard to look at a painting by local artist and muralist Gayle Mangan Kassal and not smile. Perhaps that's why the Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence, R.I., has commissioned murals from Gayle three times. The Boston Medical Center called her twice to paint their walls with scenes that help, for a moment or two, brighten the lives of the ailing and healthy people who gaze upon them. The paintings are colorful, animated, yet intricately detailed murals that Gayle painstakingly researches and composes.

Listening to the Annapolis resident discuss the steps involved in painting every fish, flora and fauna in her latest "Opus in Acrylic," it's easy to

understand the agony and ecstasy Michelangelo endured painting the Sistine Chapel. Only he never painted a playful fish with Grandma's lips or a bug with big, hypnotic eyes just like Gayle's.

Gayle was commissioned to create a mural nine feet tall and twenty-six feet wide for the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. The 234 square foot painting has already been installed in the center's Pediatric Trauma and Burn Services area of the hospital. The room is dominated by a large guitar-shaped steel tub in which children soak while undergoing life-saving treatment for burns.

Before the mural was attached to two walls, the room had the ho-hum bland look of a typical medical suite. Once the mural was in place, a child sitting in the therapeutic tub could easily imagine resting inside a huge, vibrant coral reef.

The mural was commissioned by the D.C. Fire Fighters Burn Foundation, a group of active and retired fire fighters, who fundraised to outfit the entire room. "Members of the hospital's Pediatric and Burn Services unit were looking at murals on the walls of other hospitals on the East Coast and they liked the ones I had created at Hasbro and Boston," said Gayle. "They loved that I was a local artist."

Her beautiful painting features lively sea horse, clown fish, sea stars, angel fish, a sting ray, a mother-and-child pair of loggerhead turtles swimming fin-in-fin and hermit crabs circulating around branch and brain coral. Gayle paints in a realistic but playful style.

Though Gayle's work is displayed in corporate and private collections nationwide, her artistry is well-known in this area, too. In 2005, her design was selected as the featured artwork for the poster promoting the Eastport Yacht Club's Parade of Lights. Since then, Gayle has returned every year to organize the competition for this hometown honor.

Along the way, there were challenges, starting with the hospital room. Gayle found she had to paint around "electrical boxes, copper pipes, medical equipment and the huge adult-size metal soaking tub. The positive side of the tub was its organic shape as I tried to mirror it in the large grey green coral behind it." The second challenge was the colors of the room. "I needed to find a common denominator to unify all that is going on," she said, "so it looks like the mural was first and the color choices of the room came second." Surprisingly, it took only six months to paint the gargantuan project.

She also thought of the patients that might use the room. "Beginning with the left wall, I placed large black and white fish, as they will be easier to carry infants over to them. Plus those are terrific colors for that age. This is why I painted a lot of clown fish. They have simple colors and are fun to animate." Each fish in her mural bears an eerie resemblance to people Gayle knows, from her son to her 95-year-old grandmothers, to Collin's friends, several cousins and a neighbor named Natalie.

"The joke was if you make a silly face in a photo, Ms. Gayle might turn you into a fish," said Gayle with a giggle.



In the studio before rolling up the canvas for installation photo— Gayle Mangan Kassal