

Living a life full of adventures

Kate Grigg, Special to the Packet & Times
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Kate Grigg/Special to the Packet & Times Hope Herbst, guest artist at Peter Street Fine Arts Gallery for the month of October, is "... waiting to be called" to her next adventure.

The name she was given, her pioneer ancestry (McRae clan), her father buying a 30-acre campsite after the war, her mother only recently letting it go: a legacy of stubborn optimism, a kind of insistent happiness that runs through Hope Herbst like a streak of sunlight. It has been running since she and her siblings (Hope is one of six) roamed eight acres in Orillia and 30 acres at their summer campground (Arnstein Park Campsite), protected from life's shadows and exposed to its beauty, to rocks and sun and sky and water.

Holes in the boat didn't stop them. A trip to the general store, some bubble gum mixed with sand, an improvised paste to smear over the bottom and they were seaworthy again. They never sank. Just as Hope's pioneer predecessor, whose husband died before reaching Canada, somehow kept her head above water alone in a strange country with six children to raise.

Hope was just as plucky when her turn came. Divorced, with two children to feed and two weeks away from the bottom of the barrel, she walked into a building where a receptionist was needed. It wasn't Hope's dream job. It wasn't like her first job at Sam the Record Man (in Orillia) where Hope worked happily under a manager who wanted to run a business, not run the employees.

And it wasn't like the job she had in Ottawa (after marrying and relocating) working as a counsellor. Frankie was "gone." In a helmet and diaper, sleeping in a crib in his fifties, too far withdrawn for anyone to reach. They only wanted Hope to get him to the washroom and back but Hope didn't think you could call that a life. Frankie was a person; whatever his condition, he was a soul. She started massaging his legs, blue from lack of use, and talked to him every day as if he understood. Until Frankie, never known to speak, started calling her mommy.

Replacing someone in the art therapy department brought Hope closer to her original self. Since she was a kid, Hope had drawn and painted and dreamed of the art she would one day create; an expression of what really matters, an assembling of the puzzle pieces, what Hope calls "the grander story."

Being a mother was beautiful too. It made her grow, focus on what's important in life. Only kids have to be fed and so Hope found herself saying yes to answering 15 phone lines at the reception desk. A job Hope soon got the hang of while continuing to bang on the door of the department where she knew she belonged, advertising and marketing.

A family trait, she says, insisting that, "...whatever I want, it's going to happen."

Though they kept saying no, what qualifications did she have, and Hope kept persisting, sure she could combine the psychological and artistic into successful marketing. When they finally gave her a chance, no one had regrets.

Until, 14 years later, Hope felt the pain of losing her job, cut off from satisfying work and what had been like family, the road before her suddenly unfamiliar. Only no road is empty to Hope. Every road is a route full of opportunity. You never know what or who you might encounter and how it might change you.

Hope and her husband Chris (married a decade ago at a Mayan temple) spent a season on the boat, built a log house, designed another. Started travelling in the old '78 GMC RV they call "The Beast." East Coast, West Coast, California, Colorado, and recently, a trip to Greece, sailing in the Mediterranean to celebrate their 10th anniversary. Where Hope took pictures of the clean, sharp, colour-saturated landscape, and later put together a show of photographs and paintings called A Taste of Greece currently on exhibit at Peter Street Fine Arts Gallery (until the end of October).

Hope (now a legal assistant) doesn't know what's next. Only that she wants to concentrate on art and live every moment and leave her heart open. She's not done exploring. She's still the girl who knew "unlimited" summers. Still lit within by a streak of sunlight.

Kate Grigg is an artist and writer who grew up in Orillia and tells stories of local people in her weekly column. If you have a story you think she might be interested in, email kategrigg@gmail.com.

