

## **Balancing Life As Mom and Artist** **By Donna Estabrooks, Belchertown, Mass.**

I'VE always been encouraged by President Ikeda's guidance that says "now is the time to change," to take action. So I ask myself, "Do you wait for inspiration? Do you wait for things to be easy? Well, it's not going to be." So, I realize, this moment is the time to paint. I paint when my 6-month-old son is happy, or when he's asleep. No longer do I wait for inspiration!

It was difficult for me to have my own family—I had a miscarriage the day after Christmas in 1995, after nine weeks of an unplanned pregnancy. At the time it seemed as though I was so happy with my life. It was perfect and I was satisfied with it. I was living my dream. I was making a good living doing my fine art. I was living in the countryside on an organic farm and working at a studio in the Northampton area. I was happy with my Buddhist practice and with my friends. I didn't really need to have children, but it wasn't that I decided I didn't want them either.

Six months after I miscarried, I was pregnant again. At the time I was working hard, painting over forty pieces, to create artwork for a 1997 calendar, a fundraising project for an organization called Friends of AIDS CARE/Hampshire County, a division of Hospice of Hampshire County. (They've also asked me to do their 1998 calendar.)

Throughout the project I experienced my own healing and transformation, for I was struggling with two things simultaneously—the personal challenge of creating and nurturing a new life growing inside me, while acknowledging and honoring my first baby that I had lost the previous year. I felt the most incredible grief that I had ever felt in my life; but I found hope, courage, strength and joy alongside great suffering. They seemed to be inseparable for me.

Though I said I would take three months off and just care for the baby, in two months I was going crazy, so I knew I needed to bring the artwork back into my life. I remember the day I said, "No matter what I'm going to do my art." I gradually made it a regular activity. Now my challenge is balancing my life as a mom and my life as an artist for kosen-rufu.

My art is focused more on the human condition, such as courage or hope, love, unity, relationships. It's an expression of whatever I might happen to be dealing with in my life. After I create a piece, I look into it for some time, and then I see something that I might never have seen before. It's more of a discovery process, and it's really thrilling to me. I feel incredibly fortunate that I can make a living doing this. Ninety-five percent of my income comes from the sale of my artwork, which can be found in galleries in Northampton, Mass., Acton, Mass., Portland, Me., Kennebunk, Me., and Brattleboro, Vt. My market right now is doing originals. The latest thing is that these galleries are going to have their own websites.

I USED to teach full time and do my art. Now I teach a creativity class one day a week at my studio in Florence, Mass. Sometimes I teach a couple of private

classes. I've seen my teaching style change over the years because before, I used to teach technique and ask students for a portfolio review. Today that doesn't matter to me at all. Someone can come to the class and have a master's degree or someone else may never have picked up a paint brush. Everybody's equal in the class, including myself.

I let my students know that the work they're doing in the moment is all right; that they're okay the way they are right now. Some people think they have to go to school and once they get their degree, then the degree means they know how to do artwork.

I pray every day to accomplish my mission as an artist dedicated to world peace by producing art that touches people's lives. This means to me that no matter what happens in my life, I won't be swayed in my faith or in my creative life. I'll continue doing my art. One of my favorite quotes from Nichiren Daishonin is from "The Eight Winds": "A truly wise man will not be carried away by any of the eight winds: prosperity, decline, disgrace, honor, praise, censure, suffering and pleasure. He is neither elated by prosperity nor grieved by decline" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 206). Before I practiced Buddhism, I was very superstitious. I felt I had to be lucky to do what I really wanted to do. I thought that I would do art as a living only if things went well.

AFTER I graduated with a B.F.A. in painting from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1982, I taught there for nine years as an artist-in-residence. Although technically I work with acrylics and oil pastels, I feel any other aspect of my work is really about my spirituality and my Buddhist practice. Technique seems unimportant—it's really more about listening. Listening and also letting go. It wasn't until I started practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in 1987 that I felt I was standing up for myself and my passion for my art. I no longer needed recognition or good grades to make me feel important. That's when I started to appreciate my practice so much.

As a teacher, some people tend to place me in a high position and expect something significant from me. But what I strive to do is bring out and enhance what they already have inside their lives, their creativity. To me, it's a way to tap into the Buddha nature. Tapping into your Buddha nature, I think is important in art. □