

WAG

Where Class Meets Sass

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Don Nice and his daughter Leslie Heanue.

Heanue and Nice's father-daughter business

Photographs and story by Colleen Wilson.

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There is a dusty and windy road in Garrison that eventually leads to the Hudson River, and next to that is a 200-year-old house painted a youthful yellow that has been in the Nice family for 45 years.

During that time, it has fostered a father-daughter company — he a painter, she a businesswoman — that has been years in the making and only just recently come full circle.

The studio is on the third floor where the aging wooden floor boards creak and sunlight pours in through the room, which is lined with windows.

At one end is Leslie Heanue's desk and stacks of finished canvases resting against a wall. On the other side is Don Nice's workspace with a Converse shoe atop the desk and a long bookshelf with his sketchbooks that go back decades. In the center of the room sits a canvas of an unfinished Pabst Blue Ribbon can.

Nice is sharp and articulate as he chronicles his career in art and describes the methods he experimented with over the years. Not missing a beat is Heanue, who pipes in occasionally during the conversation with comments about the evolution of her father's artistic journey, and who has had a journey of her own that took unexpected detours before she became the corporate face of Nice's private collections.

The two recounted their relationship as one that "expectedly and unexpectedly" changes from familial to professional all the time.

Nice's career started way before Heanue first got involved as a part-time curator for his work in 2000. Indeed, the artistic turning point for Nice — who studied painting during the 1950s in Europe and has art degrees from the University of Southern California and Yale University — happened in 1966 in a Minneapolis supermarket one day, he said, when a bunch of grapes steered him away from recreating the landscapes of Florence.

Nice said he did a series of grape paintings, painting unit by unit until eventually the fruit was 9 feet tall on canvas.

"And I thought, 'This is it. People cannot walk past,'" and then in unison Nice and Heanue said, "A 9-foot bunch of grapes."

The grapes spurred a desire to paint vegetables. Then it was a buffalo Nice saw on an envelope from the U.S. Department of the Interior. If it sounds like shades of Andy Warhol, Nice doesn't see it that way.

"I was never considered in the Pop movement, because my things didn't have that kind of banality, didn't have that kind of easy look. They were a little more difficult to put in context because of the big, single-image thing. Like, 'What do you do with that? Where do you put that in art history?'"

The recognition of his work's complexity "pleased me a lot," he said.

Finding a place for Nice in history has become a mission, and a job, for Heanue — though not in the way she expected.

Heanue graduated from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1985 with a degree in business and became a clerk for the specialist firm Benjamin Jacobson & Sons LLC. From the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, she went to what was then Chase Manhattan Private Bank where she moved up to vice president of the wealthy family segment. Family challenges then brought her home where she helped create a book of her father's art and organized exhibitions while running a home daycare facility.

In 2004, Heanue saw an opportunity to create a business, the nonprofit Therapeutic Equestrian Center in Cold Spring for people with disabilities. In six years, she came up with a business plan, helped design the building and raised \$2.5 million to build the 30,000-square-foot facility. For its first three years, she was the executive director and helped get it off the ground.

But then in January of last year, her father developed pneumonia, which led to heart complications.

"We almost lost him," Heanue said. "I just realized that it's time to come home again."

After getting out of the hospital, Nice decided, at his daughter's suggestion, to start painting again and get back to his roots in the single image, what he's best known for.

"My reputation is there," he said. "But it's not something that's right up on the forefront. I'm not a blue-chip artist."

And there, daughter interrupts father to add, "Well, not yet."

For more, visit donnice.com.