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Art and altruism meet in Blacksburg painter

By GREG ESPOSITO
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BLACKSBURG - Sally Mook considers herself pretty lucky. The 67-year-old mother of four lives in a spacious house overlooking the Jefferson National Forest. She and her husband, Dean, have been married for 49 years. She dotes on her dog, Zeke, and her four cats, and her art career has taken off recently.

But even Mook occasionally feels sorry for herself - like when she found out a week ago that she was going to lose her first tooth. But that night the former nurse went to volunteer at the New River Valley Free Clinic, where she saw a man with no teeth - and no right leg.

"That will bring you back to reality," she said. "I have no complaints."

Mook has been volunteering at the free clinic for 20 years and has been serious about art for a decade. Both activities serve as a kind of therapy for her.

In 1973, three years after the

birth of her youngest child, Mook started taking nursing classes through a vocational program in Radford. After completing the 18-month course, she got a job with Dr. William Hendricks, a family doctor who began volunteering at the free clinic shortly after it started in 1981. Mook started making monthly trips to help in 1983. She screens patients for the doctors, taking their blood pressure and ordering lab work.

But for many patients, she is just somebody they can talk to.

"They might just be there to get their medication refilled and I'm just shocked about what's going on in their lives," she said.

One might say the same about Mook. An outwardly cheery person who is so concerned about not hurting other creatures that she escorts spiders out of her house, she has paintings that seem completely out of place in her collection of scenes of everyday life and family portraits. A person holding back a group of angry black stallions with red eyes hangs in her hallway. In her basement where she does her work is a canvas filled with demons - vicious red-horned monsters vie for space with clowns wearing wicked smiles.

"It's like Halloween or something, it's just terrible," she

said. The work, called "Acknowledging Demons," stems from a violent incident last June, the details of which she doesn't want revealed. But the solution to the sleepless nights that followed it has been her art.

"Acknowledging Demons," like most of Mook's recent award-winning paintings, is what she calls her "weird stuff." She paints the background one color and then looks for clues about what belongs there. Shadows and areas where the paint darkens tell her what to paint. The result is a kind of collage that includes everything from alligators and apes to owls and babies. The piece with the ape and alligator won her best in show at the annual Virginia Watercolor Society competition in 2001.

"I paint what is there," she said. "I don't try to figure the things out. I just do it."

Mook, who will enter her first international art show in October, has been interested in art since trying to copy paintings hanging in her grandparents' house when she was a child. The oldest of four children, Mook can also trace her altruistic spirit to her childhood in Concord, N.C.

She and her sister were friends with the daughters of a black family that lived near them. One day while shopping, they stopped

for a drink from the water fountain. Mook and her sister drank from the whites-only fountain. The blacks' fountain wasn't working, so Mook told the girls to drink from their fountain.

"They wouldn't do it. They were afraid they'd get in trouble," she said, still emotional about the injustice of an event that happened 60 years ago.

While she has exercised her caretaker spirit since becoming a mother, her interest in art wasn't fully rekindled until the late 1980s, when she began taking art classes at Virginia Tech. In 1990 she went to The Studio School in Roanoke and studied under Vera Dickerson.

"I was so excited," she said. "The teachers were totally dedicated to their art and so enthusiastic."

She retired from nursing to focus on art in 1994. While her showing at the Virginia Watercolor Society competition in 2001 put her on the map, she said her biggest thrill was finally winning Blacksburg's Art Along the Fence competition this year.

"That's the one that really really touches me because it's my hometown," she said. "It really meant so much to me."

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