

Mason merges visual, musical arts to establish a worldwide following

by Michelle Leach

Editor's note: This is one in a series of feature stories on Greater Omaha area Women of Distinction. The 2009 Omaha Woman of Distinction will be revealed at the next Midlands Business Journal's Awards Dinner in December.

Jean Mason's work first received attention when it appeared in a national women's magazine. She was seven.

A few years later Mason sold her first painting, a seascape, for \$50. Four decades later, Mason's expansive paintings, often depicting musicians playing their key-boards and guitars can be found at galleries from Omaha to New York City.

Her collections hang in office buildings, like Blue Cross and Blue Shield, OnTrack Recording Studio, Quality Living, and her vibrant works have graced Australian tourist brochures. You may have seen her pieces on CD covers and the back of T-shirts; the former display of her work brings the artist / educator particular joy. "I love when I walk around and see my painting on someone's back — to know that somebody liked my work well enough that they bought that T-shirt," Mason said.

The works that people wear and want in their homes and businesses often exude joy. Colorful, large-scale works illustrate the synergy between saxophonist and keyboardist, and the shared rhythm of bandmates. But not every piece is so joyful.

A 4 feet by 6 feet acrylic painting Mason created for the local Artists' Co-op Celebrate America exhibit depicts a young Marine marching through the darkness while conflict is off in the distance. The painting was inspired by Mason's son, Bill Mason, a Marine Reservist who is currently pursuing his MBA in the Chicago area.

"The important connection between all of those pieces is they're highly emotional," Mason said.

Mason learned to convey emotion with a brush from her mother, an oil painter. Her mother also encouraged participation in the musical arts.

"I play a lot of instruments," she said, "But I don't play any of them well, so it makes me value and respect musicians all the more."

Mason's formal training in art began at age 12 and coincided with the sale of her first piece at a shopping mall art exhibit.

In high school her ability to produce large-scale works took shape when she developed backdrops for local theater companies. Upon graduation, Mason pursued degrees in art and education from the University of Kansas — the same institution where she met her husband of more than 30 years, Mike Mason.

In addition to Bill, the couple has two other children: Jennie Mason, a local fashion designer, and the late Paul Mason, a professional wrestler.

Through the years, Jean Mason also worked as a technical illustrator, creating images for a bike carrier company that relied on Mason's work to provide instructions via drawings that were so clear that words were not necessary.

It wasn't until roughly a decade ago that Mason started to create pieces with music as the subject and inspiration. "When I created my first musical pieces, others could relate," she said. "Music is universal." And music sells in a way that depictions of the sea don't sell in Nebraska, Mason said.

Mason has studio space at the Hot Shops and the Artists' Co-op, but does most of her creating out of her Carter Lake home. When the home was built, studio space was set aside. Mason can become so wrapped up in her work — creating multiple pieces at one time — that she may not even notice that one day has rolled into the next.

To the outsider, it may seem an envious position to be in; to work out of your home in your pajamas and to be so passionate about what you do that one day passes into the next without your knowing it. But Mason stresses that her



Painter Jean Mason shares her training and natural gifts with children, busy professionals, seniors and rehab patients.

work requires business sense and a high degree of organization in conjunction with all that creativity.

For example, Mason is already in the process of planning for a space exploration exhibit that will launch in August 2010. That planning is required due to the fact that oil paintings sometimes take six months to dry, and due to the sheer scope of the project. Mason and another artist need to fill an entire gallery with fresh work.

Outside of her works, Mason is also passionate about exposing or reacquainting others with art. She imparts her talent and knowledge to youth with Girls Inc., as well as seniors at retirement villages and patients who are in rehab for conditions such as head trauma. It's really fun to go from people who are 12 to people who are 70 or 80 because they have a completely different perspective but are similar sometimes," Mason said.

Mason also has a passion for the Omaha Creative Institute, a series of two-hour art classes that have appealed to professionals. She stresses that the traditional "left brained" professional, excelling in disciplines like economics, actually has more in common with an artist that one may initially think - creativity is tested and exercised, just in different ways.

Mason is also an advocate for empowering people at a young age to embrace their passions - be it science or art or music. "I have met doctors and lawyers who say they used to be a guitar player or a saxophone player; 'used to be' is sad but 'might have been' is even sadder," she said. "There are a lot of people who 'might have been' in this world they might have some phenomenal, challenging creative career.

"You need a career to pay the mortgage, but 'might have been' is a sad thing, so that's why things like the Creative Institute are so exciting to me, because it fulfills a lot of 'might have beens' for a lot of people in little, two-hour bites that are do-able. A lot of people are living in a world where they are missing that chunk of something that they have put aside because they went to law school."