



Art for a Cause

*Annual Art in the City supports
mission of Family Health Center*

A painting by artist Ria Hills of Uxbridge. Hills donates her work to the Art in the City auction, which benefits the Family Health Center of Worcester.

BY NANCY SHEEHAN

Each year, Family Health Center of Worcester offers an artful way to help the area's neediest residents. Called "Art in the City," the annual event supports high-quality health, dental and social services for low-income and uninsured patients through the sale of artwork donated by about 60 local artists.

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Ria Hills

PHOTOGRAPH BY CONLARI

In 1976, artist Ria Hills of Uxbridge was pregnant with twins and under the care of Dr. Lucy Candib at Family Health Center when it was just a fledgling practice in downtown Worcester. Dr. Candib is still practicing at Family Health, and Hills is still making art, some of which you can see each year at Art in the City.

"Our twins were my first pregnancy, and the care that I received at the health center was exceptional. This event is my way of giving back," she said.

Hills works mostly in pastels, a medium she originally chose when her youngest son was a small child. "It was easy to stop and get back to without the hassle of cleaning up," she said. "It became my favorite medium. I fell in love with the brilliant colors and the direct contact. The only tools you need are a surface, pastel sticks and your fingers, and there's no waiting for paint to dry."

With her children grown, Hills became a full-time artist in 2006, working mostly in pastels. Her work is part of a permanent collection at The Preservation Framer and Gallery in North Attleboro and The Silver Circle Gallery in Putnam, Conn. The February 2013 issue of *The Pastel Journal Magazine* featured her food art paintings.

Her contribution to Art in the City this year will be a painting titled "Bird Houses," an 8 inch by 8 inch pastel painting of two bird houses and a pear.

"My mother was the inspiration," she said. "It was painted two years ago when she was in a nursing home with Alzheimer's disease. My mother always had a love for birds so I decided to decorate her room in a bird theme. I found the bird houses at the Salvation Army with her room in mind. It wasn't until I came home with a pear to paint that I saw a



picture-perfect opportunity to pair them together."

The still life likely will highlight Hills' stated focus on shapes, color and light, and the challenge of finding the right balance between them.

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"The artists are so generous," Noreen Johnson Smith, vice president of development and advancement at Family Health Center, said. "Many of them come to the event so people get to meet the artists who've produced this fantastic artwork. It's really a wonderful introduction to the local art scene."

The 16th annual Art in the City will be held May 1 at Mechanics Hall. The evening will include live music by the Kallin Johnson Trio, a silent auction, gourmet hors d'oeuvres and a visually striking cross-section of what's going on in the Worcester art world.

Family Health Center is a full-service health center serving residents of Worcester and the surrounding area at its main site at 26 Queen St., Worcester, and satellite centers in Webster Square, Worcester, and in Southbridge. There is also a school-based program at Elm Park Community School in Worcester.

Last year, Family Health served some 33,000 people, most of whom had nowhere else to turn. "The mission of the organization is to ensure that the entire community has access to high-quality health care regardless of their ability to pay for services," Smith Johnson said. "Poverty should not be a reason that individuals are denied health care."

Art in the City, with a fund-raising goal of \$50,000 this year, goes a long way toward supporting that mission.

Art in the City fundraiser

16th annual Art in the City, an auction of artwork and more, to benefit the Family Health Center

When: 6 to 9 p.m. May 1

Where: Mechanics Hall, 321 Main St., Worcester

How much: \$40; tickets available at the Mechanics Hall box office.

For more: Call (508) 860-7951 or email Georgianna Sgariglia at georgianna.sgariglia@fhcw.umassmed.edu



Opposite page, Ria Hills is photographed in her Uxbridge studio. Her artwork, at left and opposite page, is shown at the Preservation Framer and Gallery in North Attleboro and The Silver Circle Gallery in Putnam, Conn.

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Ria Hills

"It's incredibly important to our organization, but it's also important to raise awareness of the health needs of the community," she said. The event is designed to appeal to serious art collectors as well as those new to the concept of buying something original and locally made instead of mass produced wall decor from a chain store.

Johnson Smith leaned more toward the latter option when she began working at Family Health about seven years ago.

"When I was hired they told me 'Oh, our big event is an art auction.' And I said 'No. You've got to be kidding me. Don't make me organize an art auction.' I'm not an art aficionado. I love the French Impressionists and I go to museums, but I know nothing about the local art scene."

She also was daunted by the prospect of having to ask artists, many of whom are just eking out a living, to make a

donation to the cause. But she needn't have worried.

"I could not believe the response from the local art community and also artists from outside the region who are connected to Family Health in a whole variety of ways," she said. "It's just amazing. People call and say 'I have a piece ready' and 'I'm working on a piece for the spring. What do you think about this or that' ... We have artists who create pieces just for this event."

Johnson Smith who once dreaded having to organize an art show now looks forward to the event each year. "Now I have to say my house is now full of local art and I love it," she said. "I say, 'Oh my gosh I can't wait to see what so and so has produced.' I have a sense of what the individual artists do and what their styles are and it's wonderful."

Here are a few of the artists who are participating this year: