

A Bay County Original

Donna Burgess
Adds Color to
the Gulf Coast

BY JULIE ROOT

Capturing the essence of life along Northwest Florida's picturesque coast is second nature to Donna Burgess. After all, the acclaimed artist and Panama City native has spent most of her adult life enjoying and portraying the relaxed lifestyle and natural beauty of the place she works in and calls home.

Burgess is famous in Northwest Florida for capturing the beauty and joy of coastal life through her watercolor interpretations, bold acrylics on canvas and award-winning festival poster art.

The artist has expanded her gallery at The Market Shops at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort, which she first opened in 1999. She has installed new equipment that allows her to stretch canvasses, cut mats and customize framing for customers on site.

"We moved all of my framing equipment from my workshop in Panama City to this location, which gives me more time



Burgess poses with one of her more important artistic muses.

Culture

to spend with people visiting the gallery," she said.

Burgess' state-of-the-art, computerized mat cutter allows customers to select their own font style, insert clip art and more, all in just a few minutes. It is the only frame shop offering these customized services in the local area.

On most weekdays, Burgess can be found in her gallery, chatting with guests, working and laughing with her employees.

"I love having more time to talk with my customers, many of whom come back here year after year during their vacation," she said. "They provide valuable feedback about the progress and continuing evolution of my work."

Some are inspired to visit the gallery while checking in at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, which features five large acrylic paintings of palm trees at the hotel's front desk and another behind the bell stand.

"Donna's work is often the first thing our guests see when they visit our hotel, and that's why we commissioned her to create these one-of-a-kind paintings," said Marshall Thompson, the Hilton Sandestin's vice president of sales. "Her work has become synonymous with our destination."

Burgess' signature designs feature scenes of coastal life, such as tin-roof beach cottages, animals and children at play, whimsical marine creatures, and colorful, tropical plant life. Her award-winning festival poster designs have promoted a variety of Emerald Coast events, including the annual spring Sandestin Wine Festival – an event whose promotional materials have featured her artwork for the festival's entire 20-year history. The Beaches of South Walton's Autumn Tides is another popular annual event that has featured Burgess' artistic touches since its inception.

A fixture in the Florida Gulf Coast art scene for more than 25 years, Burgess said she believes in painting what she knows – and she knows a lot about fishing. The former Donna Howell grew up around fishing supplies and the fishermen who bought them at her family's business, Howell Marine Supply in Panama City. Her parents, Bill and Hazel Howell, ran the business for 40 years before retiring and turning it over to Donna and her husband, Mark Gentry, 15 years ago.

"Growing up around the fishing industry inspired me to create the first Destin

Seafood Festival poster in 1988, which depicted authentic commercial fishing gear with colorful red snapper," Burgess said. "The poster was a big hit because the men liked the realistic components featured in the design, while women liked the watercolor style and bright colors."

Burgess went on to create the image symbolizing the festival for the next 12 years.

Since then, Burgess' paintings have grown in popularity. While maintaining a studio in Panama City, she expanded into Destin and Seaside. Today her galleries are consolidated at The Market Shops at Sandestin. Selected Burgess artworks also are displayed at her longtime friend Susan Lovelace's Interiors Gallery at Watercolor Resort.

Burgess is renowned not only for her artistic talent but for her philanthropic

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endeavors as well. Her painting inspired by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, raised more than \$50,000 for the New York Police and Fire Widows' and Children's Benefit Fund, and she developed a series of Labrador Retriever images in which a portion of proceeds raised benefited the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind Inc. She also has contributed to a number of national and community charities through auctions and sales of her work.

When she's not working at her gallery, Burgess enjoys the serene sanctuary of the beautiful home she shares with her husband, overlooking the bay in the historic St. Andrews district of Panama City.

"I love to come home in the early evenings and sit out on the porch under the oaks and unwind," she said. "This area of Panama City is so beautiful and quiet. It's as close to traditional Old Florida as any community you can find."

The classic white, cottage-style home was built on the one of the last undeveloped

pieces of property in St. Andrews – a site the couple happened to luck into.

"We were in the right place at the right time and were so excited to be able to buy this property," Burgess said.

The entirely custom home was built to suit Burgess' particular needs as an artist, as well as the couple's desire to entertain often and host out-of-town visitors and family. Her studio sits on the second floor of the home's carriage house, nestled among the moss-draped oak trees that dot the lawn. Inspiration for her work is visible everywhere – from the photos of her daughters and new grandson Benjamin to the variety of pets scampering about, including a lop-eared rabbit, a duck, a Lhasa Apso, and Hooks and Delta, two Labrador Retrievers.

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"I love having animals around me – they are my stress management," Burgess said.

The menagerie runs freely around the grounds, with the rabbit (a gift from the Easter Bunny four years ago) safeguarded by the Labs.

"I'll just yell at Hooks to 'Go find rabbit' and he bounds out the door and finds the rabbit, then licks him all over. The rabbit loves it and even sleeps with the dogs," she said.

Visitors to Burgess' gallery will see different prints of all of her animals, along with many portrait commissions she has completed of clients' children and pets. The artist can create realistic portraiture with her signature soft watercolor style just by looking at a photograph.

"I prefer to take the pictures myself, but I can work with customer's own photographs if they are visiting from out of town," she said.

Side by side with soft, ethereal watercolors, gallery visitors also find intense acrylics, brightly painted frames, and museum-quality fine art. A line of stationery featuring Burgess's work that can be customized also is available. ■