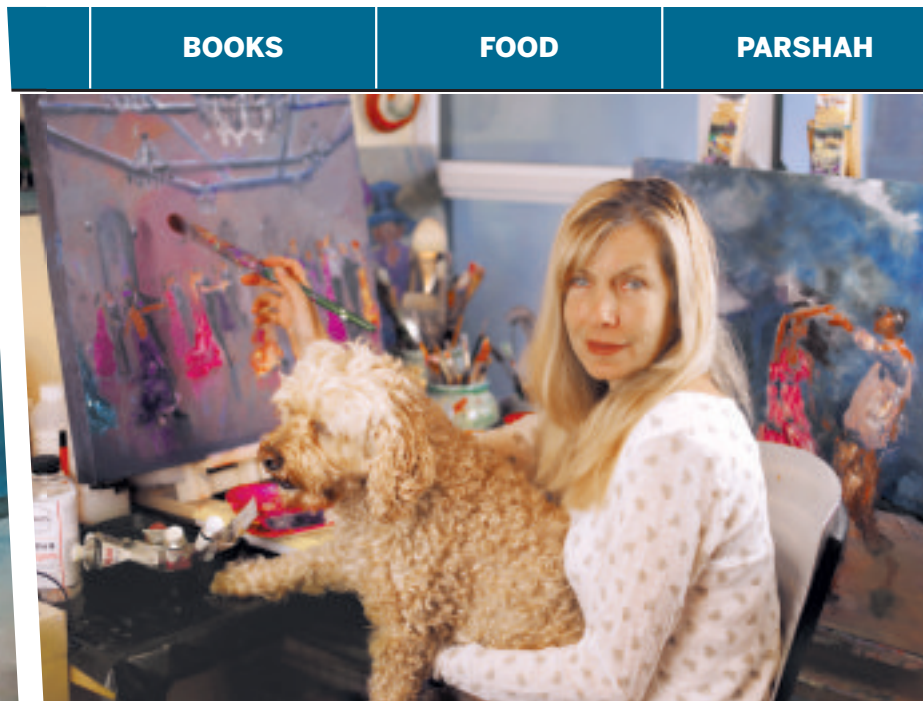


Jewish Life



Suzanne Gardner (holding her dog Annie) painting 'You Take my Breath Away'
On left, 'Sea Breeze' ROBERT MACNEIL PHOTOS

Diabetes robbed artist of her sight, but not her vision

SUSAN MINUK
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

When people fall in love with a painting, they are also investing in the artist and the artist's story.

Montreal-born Suzanne Gardner was diagnosed as a Type 1 diabetic at the age of seven. In 1999, having had diabetes for 25 years, she began to experience vision loss. Gardner braved multiple surgeries and was ultimately diagnosed with diabetic retinopathy. Now 51, Gardner has been legally blind for 18 years.

"I was eventually stabilized, but left with no functional vision in my right eye and very little – maybe 30 per cent – vision in my left eye," said Gardner.

According to the Canadian Diabetes Association, Type 1 diabetes is a disease in which the pancreas does not produce any insulin. Insulin is a hormone that helps your body control the level of glucose (sugar) in your blood. Without insulin, glucose builds up in your bloodstream, instead of being used for energy. Insulin therapy is the recommended

treatment.

When things started to go ugly with Gardner's eyes, her friends and family encouraged her to do something she enjoyed as a distraction.

"Growing up, I had dabbled in drawing and painting, so I enrolled in an art class, even though I thought it ridiculous – I mean, I was losing my vision. Art class became a form of therapy. I just loved painting. I had this desire to produce something beautiful. It took awhile, but I found my style," said Gardner with pride.

Gardner works as an impressionist painter in her Toronto home studio with Annie and Izzy, her beloved furry companions, by her side. Her work is divided into four different series: Florals, Café, Dancers in a Nightclub Wearing Formal Wear and Dancers on the Beach.

"I think my lack of vision lends itself to the style that I use. I paint dancers to signify the interconnectedness of people. We all need to depend on one another to move through life. My paintings are happy – a celebration of life through colour and movement. I try to create movement with illusion of colours dancing

around," said Gardner.

Gardner paints with acrylic and oil, while wearing very strong magnifying glasses. She uses a pallet knife to produce movement, and textures the canvas to create a blowing effect. Canvases vary in size from 12"x16" to 36"x48" and sell anywhere from \$300 to \$1,000, depending on their size. Gardner devotes four to five hours a day to her craft.

Labeling supplies in large, bold print, Gardner groups her paint colours together.

"I need to be able to tell the difference on my pallet between blues, purples and green. They all look the same to me. I group them by putting all single colours together. I need to paint a pale background and then add a dark colour in front. My work has a lot of contrast, in order for me to see it," explained Gardner.

The finished painting always gets double-checked by someone else's eyes.

"Sometimes I mess up. Someone will ask me, 'why does this face have a green tinge to it?' and so I have to un-green everybody's face. I once painted a dog and put streaks of purple in her hair and I had no idea that I had done it. The

person who bought the painting said, 'I loved how you put purple highlights in her hair. It is so creative,'" she told *The CJN* with a laugh.

Gardner has donated several paintings to the Canadian Diabetes Association. She sells a lot of her work to the Jewish community, attracting buyers worldwide through social media. Greg LeMond, the three-time Tour de France winner, owns one of her florals, as does Arnold Schwarzenegger's assistant.

Gardner's work is exhibited at a gallery in Warkworth, Ont. Her upcoming exhibits include Toronto's Hashtag Gallery from July 13 to 23 and the Avenue Gallery in Montreal in September.

Gardner wants to inspire others and educate the world about diabetes.

"I want people to see that even with adversity, you can thrive. My joy is knowing I am putting art on people's walls that makes them happy – to help make the world a bit of a better place," concluded Gardner. ■

Visit suzannegardner.com for more information.