

Her Healing Touch

Sculptor Karen Rossi brings whimsical art to St. Francis Hospital.

By Alexis Maislen

Karen Rossi calls herself a storyteller in metal. She says people tell her that her art makes them smile. Indeed, it's hard not to smile at these whimsical, brightly colored metal sculptures of everything from wild-haired angel ladies to Hartford's landmarks or a mermaid with pearl beads.

To date, Rossi, who has exhibited her works in venues all over America, has been content to make gallery-goers smile. Now she hopes to brighten the lives of those who are ill as the first artist-in-residence at Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford.

ferent avenues of expertise coming together and cooperating in the creative process."

Awalk through Rossi's Windsor Locks studio gives a hint of what she might bring to this new position. This is a place of bustle and business. Rossi has four assistants who help her sculpt, paint, and bead her jewelry, mobiles, mirrors and menorahs. In one corner perches a wall-hanging in progress for Harley Davidson's 95th anniversary that depicts a motorcycle being ridden by a James Dean-like biker with a blond in a pink dress

hanging off his back.

Another striking piece depicts a female sleuth who knows how to "buy and save" on a shopping spree for colorful antiques. Rossi made this for Nancy Aborn, the Channel 3 news reporter who owns an antique business and drives around collecting old, interesting collectibles.

"I've never had a problem with artist's block. I never get into a rut," says Rossi of her many projects. "My problem is all the ideas I can't get to."

Rossi grew up in a large extended Italian family in rural South Windsor where there weren't many neighborhood children her age. She credits her mother with developing her artistic bent. "My mother was always encouraging me to make something to keep me out of her hair and happy," Rossi says. "She knew I loved to make things."

Her mother also told her stories of her own childhood summers in Roxbury, Conn., when she would wander over to her neighbor Alexander Calder's house to be entertained by his wire-working circus sculpture. Traces of Calder's influence can be seen in Rossi's mobiles today.

Her parents' specialized welding business for the aerospace industry, AMK Welding, provided Rossi with her first understanding of welding, albeit from a distance because she and her two younger sisters were not allowed into the plant because they were girls. Intrigued, Rossi, who graduated from Southern Connecticut State University and studied at the Brookfield Arts Center, Parsons School of Design, and the Penland School of Crafts, snuck welding lessons into her schedule and did metal sculpting as a hobby. She never realized it would turn into a business of making stories out of metal.

"My work takes people out of their daily routines and makes them think deeper about something else," Rossi says. "The artwork chosen for hospitals is there to put people in a good frame of mind."

Though busy this particular day trying to hire a new office manager, packaging an order to ship to Germany, training talented high schoolers to assist her, and plasma-cutting metal to prepare projects for various galleries across the United States, Rossi believes the process of creating many pieces at once for many different audiences helps give her a healthy attitude on life. "Any one day either brings me to tears or great joy. Art makes me feel better just by making it," she says. "The act of creating has a positive effect on my adrenaline system."

She hopes to bring that feeling to the people she works with at Saint Francis. "Art is an adventure and you need to be able to travel with it," Rossi says. "It is a vehicle for the mind to travel. As long as it is open, it will bring you to a variety of places."

"Interaction with the creative process is an inspirational tool for people," she adds. "It helps people have different ideas about everything they are doing."



NICK LACY/PHOTO

For Karen Rossi, art may be found in simple things such as arranging flowers, tying a scarf around your neck, and, yes, drawing a picture.

Rossi first got involved at the hospital while visiting a cousin who was fighting cancer. As she watched the careful care her cousin received from the nurses at the hospital, Rossi says she was reminded of angels. So, in memory of her cousin, she donated one of her metal sculptures of playful angels titled "Angels on my Shoulder" to the Saint Francis Care Regional Cancer Center.

The gift fit in well with the hospital's developing ideas about how art fits in with healing. "Saint Francis has taken the mind/body/spirit connection pretty seriously. Art has a lot of qualities of personal warmth and hope that people need to feel when they have a terminal illness," says Dr. Ed Johnson, senior vice president for public relations and community affairs at the hospital. "This institution tries to take a more holistic approach to healing and out of it comes the artist-in-residence program."

Although the program is still in its nascent stages, Rossi, as consultant, already has big ideas that include treasure hunts for people in the hospital's waiting room that would have them find various pieces of the hospital's art collection, and getting community artists involved in the hospital's programs to show the health benefits of incorporating the arts into people's lives. St. Francis also wants to provide patients with materials to create art while they are coping with a long-term illness.

No matter how the program evolves, patients and other hospital visitors should not expect Rossi demanding artistic excellence as part of the bargain. To her, art may be found in simple things such as arranging flowers, tying a scarf around your neck, and, yes, drawing a picture.

As a small business owner, Rossi knows how to make things happen with limited resources. Working with St. Francis is a new experience for her. "It's inspiring to have the power and resources of an institution behind you," Rossi says. "It's thrilling to work with people from dif-

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