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# She finds peace, hope in her art

Artist uses her work to move forward after her daughter's death

By *Meredith Heagney*

## THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

It's a light title for a tribute to a person who died much too young.

The piece is named, Am I blue? You'd be too.

Artist Suanne M. Goings created it as a tribute to Brandi, her "only baby child," who died at age 33 in a 2002 car crash in Wisconsin.

The sculpture's base is a TV tray attached to a planter, supporting knickknacks the mother and daughter exchanged in their time together.

A dream journal and a blue bowl decorated with cats were gifts from Brandi to her mother. A small blue hippopotamus represents the Egyptian goddess of childbirth.

Overlooking the items are framed photos of Brandi. In her mother's favorite, the blonde with blue eyes cuddles her dog.

Goings said art has helped her heal in the eight years that Brandi has been gone.

The work she created in the aftermath of Brandi's death is on display through Upper Arlington's Arts in Work Spaces program, which lends art to businesses to increase public access.

Goings is co-owner of The Art Loft, a studio and gallery in Delaware, and she works part time as a supervisor in the LifeLine Reentry Community Center at Marion Correctional Institution.

Her exhibit, "Encountering the Sacred Through Art," opened Wednesday and will run through Sept. 30 at three locations.

Goings describes herself as spiritual, not religious, although sacred imagery is a constant in her art.

After Brandi's death, she moved out of her Worthington house, haunted by the phone call from a coroner who confirmed the news that Brandi's car had crashed in a snowstorm.

Too grief-stricken even to read, which had been one of her hobbies, Goings began making mandalas, circular designs that have traditionally symbolized concepts such as the universe and wholeness in Hinduism and Buddhism.

"I would just sit in my chair, draw a circle, and let the visual language come through," she said.

Eleven mandalas made in those first months are on display at Nurtur the Salon, 1581 W. Lane Ave. They carry titles such as Death and rebirth and In the heavenly orbit. Inside each circle are swirls of colors and shapes.

"With all the pain and grief, I didn't know what to expect," Goings said. "I didn't know if I could do art anymore."

Much to her surprise, "they're beautiful," Goings said, and they make her feel connected to Brandi. Part of her exhibit is a video created by the Marion inmates showing the mandalas in 3-D set to musical accompaniment of the notes they appear to form.

Mandalas are a staple of art therapy and a healing symbol across cultures, said Marjorie Isaacs, a Cincinnati psychologist who offers art therapy. The circular shape gives the creator the sense of a center and balance.

Goings' art invites reflection by the viewer, said Lauren Emond, arts coordinator of Upper Arlington's Cultural Arts Division.

"I can see how much of her soul she puts into her own work, and how personal and meaningful it is for her," Emond said. "I feel like I slowly got to know her relationship with her daughter through her artwork."

The display at Caspian II, an office building with a central community space at 3518 Riverside Dr., includes mandalas and also features Goings' sculptures. The "altars," as she calls them, are dedicated to the mother in different cultures.

One depicts Goings' interpretation of Isis, an Egyptian goddess worshipped as the divine mother.

The third location, the Ohio Orthopedic Center of Excellence at 4605 Sawmill Rd., features little canvas squares covered in paint and beads. One shows the Holy Grail as a chalice covered in rays of light descending from a sun.

Another depicts a seated woman, her shape nondescript save for the orange swirl of her womb and a blood-red heart. Around the woman, some of Brandi's ashes — which turned a dark shade of green, much to Goings' surprise — are sealed onto the canvas.

The religious imagery in Goings' work is probably based in her Catholic upbringing and her "search for the connection to the divine," she said.

Art "gives me peace and comfort and a connection to something larger than myself," she said.

The hole left by her only child's death is still felt daily. Grief doesn't go away, she said, but it "gets different."

She smiles as she remembers Brandi's feisty spirit and her protective nature when it came to her mother. She was never too old to hold Goings' hand in public.

"If I reach my hand out, I can still feel her hand," Goings said. "She was my best friend."

Goings believes that her and Brandi's souls were connected before either of them was born. She can still feel that bond, she said.

Her art has helped her to move forward.

The title of the last mandala in the series at Nurtur tells the story in one word:

Peace.

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**GAVIN JACKSON DISPATCH**

Delaware artist Suanne M. Goings works in her studio. Since her daughter, Brandi, died in a car accident in 2002, Goings has used art to help her cope. Her exhibit, "Encountering the Sacred Through Art," is on display at three locations.



Suanne Goings' favorite photo of Brandi is one of her cuddling her dog. Brandi was 33 when she died.