

Local Artist Finds Sense of Freedom After Devastating Fire

by Fran Cain

Everything is gone. Go to reach for something, a ruler, a screwdriver. It's not there. Oh, that's right. It burned up. Life after losing a home to fire is a constant shock.

Suzy lost her father at age 10, so she understands loss. But it was weeks before it struck her that all of her artwork was gone. She had been so busy combing through rubble, finding a place to live, being hounded by the insurance people to recount what was lost. All she wanted was to look forward. When she fully realized that her life's work had disappeared, she doubled over in pain.

She felt sorry for herself even after the insurance agent told her "you have it good" —so many clients have suffered far worse losses. Even though Suzy's mom, Sharlee who also lived there, had a heart attack, and four of the family's five cats died, Sharlee recovered and Suzy's husband, J.G., and daughter, Morgan, were safe. That's when Suzy realized home is where the family is. "We'll be okay no matter where we are," she thought. You learn from experience.

The fire was an accident. A stupid mistake. Placing blame would do no good. Rags left under the deck by the house painters ignited. The fire traveled up the interior walls. By the time it was discovered, the house was too far gone. When Suzy's mother, who had been entertaining friends at the time, realized what was happening, she suffered a heart attack. Suzy, J.G. and Morgan had been away on vacation. The next day, the only possessions left were a week's worth of clothes and toiletries they had packed for the trip. Everything else? Gone.

The family was determined to rebuild. Suzy planned and designed the new house. But during the process, she was dealt another blow. She became very sick from the stress, and has still not fully recovered. But for a year while the house was being rebuilt, the illness prevented her from leaving the temporary



home they rented. So not only had fire destroyed her home, but worse, it destroyed her health. And rebuilding her health was even harder and took far longer.

But now, seven years later, Suzy looks healthy. She is physically very active. She hikes, kayaks, and does Pilates. And she totes her new artworks, large format oil paintings on heavy wood-backed Masonite made by J.G., back and forth to the studio four days per week. That artwork has changed quite dramatically since the fire.

Before the fire, Suzy's work was small format, rigidly correct, and almost photo-realistic or architectural, rendered in pen and ink or oil. "Losing it all set me free," she says, and she calls her new work reflective of how she now sees the world — perhaps less detailed but looser and more abstract with organic, linear movement as seen in the curvy shapes of nature, or in the portrayal of trees with branches emerging from each other like fractals. In her redesign of the house, curved walls, a curved staircase with an intricate curved iron handrail, and arches are in every room, to the chagrin of the builders, and lighting fixtures follow the curve of the kitchen bar.

Two years after the fire, the family moved back into the rebuilt house. But it seemed more like an unfamiliar hotel

than a home. It took yet another year before it became a home. Every item was a sterile, history-less replacement for something lost. Years later, they are still working to rebuild the beloved collection of 10,000 books that went up in smoke.

In J.G.'s office, above the custom crafted bar made from wood retrieved from the rubble, is a sign Suzy painted of a Phoenix with dragons rising from the ashes. It is a fitting metaphor for the family that had the ground under their feet vanish in one night

of fire. Yet, J.G. views life as better all around. He sees much more variety in Suzy's art and believes she has found her comfort zone. Reminders of her prior work hang along the upstairs hallway. They are giclee copies of those that were lost. Directly across the open foyer are some of her new paintings, in distinct contrast, proving that Suzy has not only survived, but she and her work have risen to new heights.

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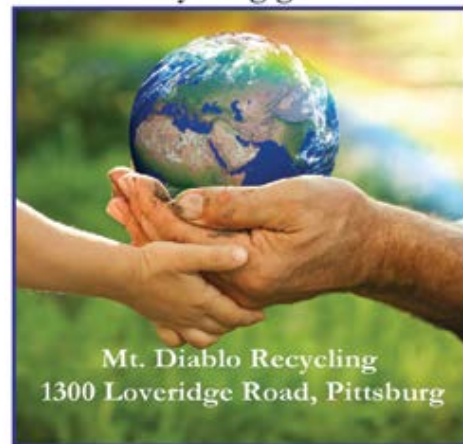
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