

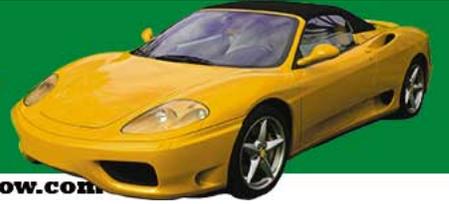
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ArtHub artist wraps up Kingman stay with typical optimism



Sally Strom poses Thursday with one of her creations at the Kingman ArtHub. (JC AMBERLYN/Miner)

Doug McMurdo

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KINGMAN - If it is true artists must suffer for their art, Sally "Sal" Strom has paid in full.

Just don't tell her that - Strom is a big believer in choosing happy over sad.

One of three artists selected to serve a four-month residency in the inaugural class of the downtown Kingman ArtHub, which was developed and opened by homebuilder Doug Angle in January, Strom will present a riveting 20-minute video that contains snippets of conversations she had with more than 100 World War II combat veterans between 2006 and 2013.

Strom said she was able to get veterans to open up about their experiences, and many found themselves talking about their time in combat - at least with people who were never there - for the first time since the war ended.

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War is ...

An artist who takes on multiple disciplines - everything except painting with oil - Strom would have long, meandering conversations with old soldiers and Marines and sailors, usually by telephone and often with the help of Skype so they could see each other.

She would then boil those conversations down to their essence. While the conversations lasted an hour or more, the longest any single veteran is featured is four minutes.

"They often said to me, 'I never told anyone about this,'" she said. "I made sure they knew I wasn't interested in the history of war, but only in their private and personal experiences."

Those experiences continued to haunt their owners in old age. One man, who operated a flamethrower, recalled how he accidentally killed three of his own guys in the fog of battle. Six decades had passed, and the guilt he felt never abated.

But the video is not just a video. In between the veterans are cartoons, images from children's museums and other lighthearted fare that can jar the senses.

"People watch the video and you can see them laugh at a cartoon and then you can read their mind. They realize they shouldn't be laughing," said Strom.

For Strom, the goal was to reveal the cognitive dissonance people engage in when the nation is at war.

"We don't really think about the wars today. We say, 'Happy Memorial Day,' but do we really mean it? And if we do, what's happy about it?"

"Somebody once said war is what happens when you're at the mall."

Letters

Strom's father was a Marine pilot during WWII and in Korea. He flew the legendary F4U Corsair fighter in both wars.

When he wasn't in the air, he wrote letters home to Strom's grandmother, who kept every one in the envelope in which it was mailed. Strom stumbled across those letters in 1999, and through them she came to know her father, who took his own life when Strom, now 58, was 10 years old.

For the next seven years, Strom treasured the letters because they were from her father, but then a health issue that would forever change her life altered her mission.

Her war

The brain tumor was diagnosed on Christmas Day, 2006, and doctors removed it Jan. 7. A second tumor was removed in 2013. The first operation affected Strom's cognitive functions. The second impacted her mobility.

It's important to remember this seven-year timeframe in Strom's life, because her doctors have assured her a third tumor will someday reappear, and this will be the one that finally gets her.

"It's not a question of if, but when," she said in an interview Wednesday. No sadness. No fear. Just absolute certainty, like waiting for the sun to set.

Following her first surgery, Strom said she was driven to take another look at her dad's loving, well-written and perfectly legible letters to his mom, this time from an academic rather than personal perspective.

"My dad's passion was flying," she said, "but he was a smart man and he was a philosophical man, and I think the war had a profound impact on him." She recalled one letter from Korea when her father disclosed he could oftentimes see the people he bombed with his low-flying aircraft, women and children included.

She's convinced her father's suicide was the result of post-traumatic stress disorder and

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she knows he's far from the only warrior to suffer.

"Twenty-two suicides a day for today's troops," she said. "That says something we all need to pay attention to."

Fast friends

Strom said one of the most surprising outcomes of her conversations with veterans is the number of meaningful friendships she made over the years.

She interviewed pilots, soldiers, sailors, Marines, Navajo code talkers, an African-American who was a pilot with the Tuskegee Airmen, and women air service pilots. Many of them have since died, but they left their legacies.

"So many World War II veterans had sons who fought in Vietnam. They could talk about their own experiences, but they couldn't talk about their sons and how some of them were affected by their Vietnam experience," she said.

While today's presentation will allow visitors to see what Strom did with her more than 100 interviews, she has moved on from war stories.

Strom was prepared to come out of the October 2013 brain surgery much like she did the first one, with cognitive problems. But her body, not her brain, was affected this time, and Strom woke up with a new and unexpected challenge ahead of her.

Optimist

The partial paralysis causes her to drag her leg behind her like it's carry-on luggage, not an appendage. She falls often - and by her own admission, she falls well.

"I'm good at falling," she said with a chuckle. "And I'm good at getting back up." Yoga keeps Strom as limber as possible and helps with her balance.

Strom also woke up from that second surgery and its grim prognosis with a new outlook.

"I didn't want anything depressing," she said. "I needed happy. I needed colors and light and fun."

With that, she began what she calls sta-glue art. She makes "quilts" out of multiple layers of cheesecloth she paints in vibrant colors. There's no stitching, just safety pins, staples and glue, hence the term sta-glue.

"This is a celebration of colors and freedom," she said. Her next project is working with mentally impaired adults in Washington state who are in a band. She will make three-minute abstract videos to go with their songs when they play their first concert.

"The first song they'll play is "Mustang Sally," she said. "How cool is that?"

What: "Dropping Like Flies," a video presentation featuring ArtHub artist-in-residence Sally Strom

When: 7:30 p.m. today

Where: Kingman

ArtHub, 402 Fourth St., on the corner of Beale

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