

Jean Riley
1909 Robins Lair Court
Arlington, Texas 76012

A GIFT OF ART

Jean Riley

Because I am severely disabled, no one ever expected much of me. But evidently I demanded a lot of myself.

I was born with cerebral palsy and have spent my life in a wheelchair. My speech is affected, and I lack fine motor control, which even simple tasks ^{makes} slow and difficult. I don't even trust my hands enough to put the straw in the pouring spot of my cup. Instead I use my mouth.

When I was a little girl, my mother bought me lots of coloring books, but she always told friends that I never stayed inside of the lines. Later I began drawing. I liked drawing rows of houses and giant chrysanthemums that covered the whole page. As the situation at home grew worse and my homework took more time, I gave up all ideas of drawing and thought of it as child's play. Because of the excessive movement caused by the cerebral palsy, I was convinced that my ability to paint was beyond the realm of possibility.

Then in 1967, when I was thirty- three years old,, an acquaintance and art instructor at the local university suggested that I give it a try, assuring me that things don't have to be perfect. I had always loved art work and decided I had nothing to lose by giving it a try. I surprised even myself. Since then I have tried different mediums, but I like the effect of working with melted crayons and ink markers. I am interested in color and

movement. I like beginning with something abstract and creating a scene that represents nature. At times this is difficult and requires a lot of time and thought. Some pieces lie around for years before they are finally finished.

In order to control the extra movement of my hand, I sit on the couch and rest my left arm on my right thigh. This limits my range of movement. But with the tablet of paper beside me I can turn it to the area where I need to work. This means that the painting is often sideways or up side down. When I melt crayons or paint with a brush, I sit on the floor.

A few weeks later a friend insisted that I enter the annual competition of the local art association. I had done so few paintings that I had little choice about what to enter. You cannot imagine my surprise when my third painting was awarded honorable mention and the other one was selected to be hung in the show. I was glad that the judges had no way of knowing about my disability. This meant that my work was judged on its own merit. I knew that the large paintings always received the top awards, but my pieces were were small. Many paintings were also rejected. Therefore I was happy simply to have my exhibited. I have also entered competitions for persons with disabilities and have received first, second, and third place awards.

Then after several years the local association was no longer sponsoring competition shows. This left me with no opportunity to show my work even once a year. I continued working, but I often felt as though I was wasting my time. Working without a goal was difficult, and it is even more difficult to judge my own work. Occasionally I had a one-woman show. But these were a lot of trouble, and I couldn't do any of the manual work myself.

Again I worked for several years with no recognition and no encouragement. I often asked myself if I were simply killing time. But I had to do something. Watching television all day was too depressing. Then a friend arranged a show at a historic building in Fort Worth. Another friend contacted the newspaper, and one of the top reporters wrote the article which along with photographs appeared on the front page.

A short time later I was nominated by the Business Press of Fort Worth, and I was recognized ^{as} ~~as~~ one of the Great Women of Texas. One of my paintings was also selected for the poster to bring awareness to the National Employment Disability month. A different artist is chosen each year by the Governor's Committee on Disability. Because my art work was selected for the poster, the local Mayor's Committee on Disability honored me with a wonderful reception.

I often think of the joy I would have missed if I had not given art a try. I would have never discovered what a wonderful gift had been given to me.