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Art not a career, but 'a way of life'

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Morristown artist Lucia Bocchino lived for her family and for art. Since her death in March, her children have been working to establish a fund for young artists in their mother's name so that her memory and legacy will live on.

The Lucia Bocchino Fund for Promising Young Artists will give scholarships and art supplies to children ages five to 17 to encourage their talents.

"When she first became ill, as morbid as it sounds, I did think that it would be wonderful to do something to continue my mother's wishes to help other people," said Lucia's daughter, artist Serena Bocchino of the Basking Ridge section of Bernards Township. She was just such a wonderful artist and she loved children. She taught me everything I know and I figure her gift should be shared with the world."



With Audrey Hepburn-like looks, a certain joie de vivre and a passion to immerse herself and her family in all forms of artistic expression, Lucia lived an ordinary life in an extraordinary manner.

"If you met her, you would think she was humble and shy, but what she did was active, dynamic and exciting," said Serena. "She would paint a rug on a wood floor. She was kind of fearless in a lot of ways."

Born Lucia Maria Confalone on March 3, 1930 to Maria Defazi and Giosue Confalone, Lucia grew up in the Bronx. She attended the High School of Music and Art and the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, both in Manhattan, before entering the work force as a freelance commercial illustrator for such well known publications as Conde Nast's Vogue.

She married Dr. William A. Bocchino in 1956 and started a family immediately, hoping to have 12 children. The Bocchinos and the six children they did have eventually left New York for Morristown. Over the years, their family grew to include 10 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

"She always said that having children was her biggest accomplishment," said Serena.

Three of Lucia's children grew up to be artists: a painter (Serena), a writer and a musician. While the other three of her children do not consider themselves artists, they all possess a passion for art.

Lucia's creative talent transcended mediums. She made eclectic multi-dimensional collages and adorned boxes. She drew, painted and did tin work.

"She fell in love with Mexican tin work," said Serena. "She would take the gigantic tin cans used for hams from delicatessens and create these mirrors out of them that were just breathtaking. She would cut them in strips and take curling tools and curl them. They are so gorgeous."

Lucia made the Bocchino family home into their own personal gallery by immersing the family in aesthetic and sensory beauty.

"She always had beautiful classical music playing, and every inch of wall was covered in our house," said Serena. "Where there wasn't something hanging, she painted murals directly on the walls. It was extreme visual stimulation. She had no limits, and really put her heart and soul into everything."

At one point, Lucia opened her own gallery, The Peanut Gallery in Tappan, N.Y., where she exhibited both up-and-coming and established artists.

"She had this building that stood on its own in old Japan and she loved it," said Serena. "It really was representative of who she was. There was a pink telephone and she painted the signs herself. It was a building that contained art, but it was also a building that was art itself."



Eventually, Lucia closed the gallery, but she continued to exhibit her own work across New Jersey and New York.

Throughout her adult life, Lucia won numerous awards and artistic contests. From prestigious juried shows to Campbell's Soup contests, critics and peers acknowledged her work time and again.

Serena recalled that as a six-year-old child, she and her mother both won divisions of a Johnson & Johnson contest where participants had to create art out of cotton swabs. While Serena used the swabs to apply paint to paper for a picture, Lucia created a cotton swab sculpture.

"I remember it so clearly," said Serena. "It was a figure looking up with a flower in the hand."

Lucia often used her talents charitably. For one such altruistic project, she combined glued-on mirrors and other materials on hand-painted background to create unique banners for King of Kings Church in Bernardsville.

"She never saw her art as a career. She saw it as a way of life, and I don't think she separated it from anything," said Serena.

On Dec. 26, 2004, Lucia suffered a left brain stroke. Although she completely lost the use of the right side of her body, she experienced a period of about a year where she could speak a little and walk with a cane or a walker.

"I got her to actually paint for maybe three days," said Serena. "We put the paint brush in her left hand and we said, 'come on mom, come on mom, come on mom,' and pushed her beyond belief. She felt sad. She hated her restrictions. But she put the brush into her right hand and started to make marks on the paper. We all cried to see her doing something that she loved to do."

Lucia died on March 14, 2007. Her family celebrated her life instead of mourning her death at the memorial service.

Lucia's paintings and drawing adorned the walls of the Bradley-Braviak Funeral Home in the Whippany section of Hanover Township for the service. Serena placed additional paintings on easels and Lucia's intricately adorned boxes throughout the room.

"We put together this gigantic memorial," Serena explained. "It was so visual and there was music. It was lovely. We made something quite sad so wonderful."

In the same spirit of love and devotion as the memorial, Lucia's children have been working to establish the fund in their mother's memory.

The family considered selling some of Lucia's work to raise money for the fund, but have since decided to make and sell boxed cards called "Luciart" featuring Lucia's work instead. However, the endeavor remains in the early stages of development. In the interim, donations made to The Lucia Bocchino Fund for Promising Young Artists are being accepted in care of Serena Bocchino, 82 Haas Road, Basking Ridge, NJ 07920.

"I think she would be totally humbled by what my brothers and sisters and I are doing," said Serena. She would be thankful and appreciative, but she was so modest. When it would touch her most is when we finally give a child money or art supplies."

