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Artists' haven celebrates creativity

By Brooks Robards - July 20, 2006

The arts are flourishing at Renaissance House in Oak Bluffs. This week, there's an event planned every night except "Silent" Wednesday, a peaceful evening when writers assemble to work quietly before gathering for refreshments. With 25 artists in residence at the 8 Myrtle Ave. center over the summer, Renaissance is definitely the operative word.

The inspiration and driving force behind this beehive of activity is Abigail McGrath. A theatrical producer, casting director, filmmaker, and soon-to-be novelist, she comes from five generations of summer residents in the Highlands section of Oak Bluffs.



Abigail McGrath provides the space for creativity at Renaissance House, the Artist's colony in Oak Bluffs. Photos by Ralph Stewart

Ms. McGrath's Vineyard lineage starts with her great grandfather, Belton Benson, a Boston carpenter/minister who had an Oak Bluffs church. The Renaissance connection runs deep, since Ms. McGrath is related to two Harlem Renaissance writers - her mother, poet Helene Johnson, and her aunt, novelist Dorothy West, who spent the last years of her life on the Vineyard.



Some nights at Renaissance House are just for quiet reflection. Arleigh Prelow worked on her writing in the summer 2005.

"Renaissance House is my gift to myself before I croak," says the lively Ms. McGrath. "She jokingly describes herself as old but very immature. "I wanted to have a place for artists to come and have to do nothing. The other thing is, I didn't want to grow old by myself. When you're an only child, you don't have sisters, cousins, nieces; you just have yourself."

Ms. McGrath and her husband Tony started Renaissance House four years ago in their home, a converted decoy painting barn next to her aunt Dorothy West's house. The goal has been to help creative people who might otherwise not be able to fulfill their promise as artists.

Atlantan Mary Wheeler, who holds down two jobs and has four children and four grandchildren, found her voice as a poet writing about domestic violence. A recipient of a Janet Hill Scholarships to Renaissance House this year, she was nominated last year for Atlanta Poet of the Year.

"Now she doesn't think of herself as a hotel worker but as an intellectual and a poet," Ms. McGrath says. "Renaissance House reaches out to people from all walks of life who need help starting out."

Eric Parsons has published his poetry in Seattle, Wash., and now is at work on a novel while staying at the Oak Bluffs artists' colony. Californian Arleigh Prelow is making a feature-length documentary about Howard Thurman.

Ms. McGrath started her artist's colony by putting out an Internet call for people interested in writing about social issues. She believes art should change people. Applicants were asked to write a letter about why they wanted to come to Renaissance House, why they



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needed to come, and to send a sample of their work.

"I was looking for insight, for those pulling away from the pack," Ms. McGrath says. "Not necessarily quality - I try not to judge the actual work."

Those who do come have only one obligation - to attend its evening salons, where people in related fields come for dinner and to talk. These include Vineyarders mystery writer Philip Craig; filmmaker Pam Benjamin and her husband, Nat, a wooden boat maker; historian Robert Hayden. Doubleday/Random House/Harlem Moon publisher Janet Hill, who worked with Ms. McGrath's aunt Dorothy West, will share her publishing wisdom with the audience.



Tony McGrath strums his guitar. He and his wife Abigail host evening salons.

Ms. McGrath, who teaches filmmaking at New York University's School of Continuing Education, hardly confines her activities to running the retreat. She launched herself professionally in the late 1960s.

"My husband and I had a theatre company in New York City, and we did social issue plays and street theatre," she explains. Ms. McGrath developed a reputation for finding the right actor for a role, so by the late 1980s, she became a casting director. Before long, she was casting films like "Babette's Feast," as well as plays.

Next, the pre-production program at NYU's Tisch School invited her to teach. "You get so jealous," she says. "These kids come in, and their parents give them \$50,000 to make a movie." So Ms. McGrath decided it was time to make her own film.

"Au Pair Chocolat" was a family enterprise. Ms. McGrath wrote the script and served as Executive Producer. Her son Benson, a lawyer, had already made three films, so he directed. Her musician son Jason Rosen wrote the film score. Husband Tony plays the bad guy. Even the family dog Louise makes a cameo appearance.

"If it hadn't been for the good will of the Island and its people, we could never have made the film," Ms. McGrath says. "They couldn't have been more welcoming." The production turned into a comedy of misadventures.

Equipment fell off the back of a truck and necessitated a year's shooting delay until it was returned. A plane part from the 9/11 terrorist attack fell on the Ms. McGrath's car as it traveled on New York's West Side Highway, and white ash from the blast destroyed their equipment. They had to re-shoot much of the film, which also had to be re-edited because of still other glitches.

"Au Pair Chocolat" has been shown in more than 20 independent film festivals, including the Martha's Vineyard African American Film Festival. A family comedy, it has no sex, dope, car chases, gangs, or violence.

Ms. McGrath is already working on her next project, a film about Fannie Lou Hamer, the African-American sharecropper and voting rights.

"I'd love to get Queen Latifah to play her," Ms. McGrath says. "It's not about being black. It's about hope." Renaissance House is about hope," Ms. McGrath says.

If anyone can inspire hope in emerging artists, it's Abigail McGrath. She's working on a novel, "Three Little Women," about her mother, her aunt, and herself. Then there's her film about how to pray, a religious and metaphysical adventure story. And don't forget "Zulu Dick," her comedy about three Scandinavian women who go to the Caribbean in search of adventure.

For more information on activities at Renaissance House contact Abigail McGrath at 508-696-0559 or email abigailmcgrath@aol.com.

Brooks Robards is a poet, former film instructor, and frequent contributor to The Times

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