

# 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple

*Artist Mary Lou Goertzen makes a life of simplicity in one-room school house*

By Pam Spettel

Mary Lou Goertzen is known for her graceful watercolor flowers highlighted by pen and ink foliage. Her images, created from the mid-1960s through the early 2000s, became so popular they were placed on greeting cards, prints, posters and even fine china.

Mary Lou also is known to be a peacemaker and community builder.

Mary Lou and her husband, Ernie, moved to Deadwood from Berkeley, California, in 1974. Their Kansas Mennonite roots led the two conscientious objectors of the Vietnam War to Berkeley to be a part of the war resistance and make art.

In Berkeley, they met members of the Alpha Family—an intentional community governed through consensus—who had located in Deadwood. The couple was drawn to the idea of having a group of like-minded people with whom to form a greater community.

On their first exploration to Deadwood, a realtor showed the couple the former one-room Deadwood School. Built in the 1890s, the school had sat unoccupied for a long time. Ernie made an offer on the spot.

“This was the area school for decades,” says Mary Lou, 87. “People voted here, and sometimes had church here. There are lots of ghosts in this house, which I enjoy.”

The Goertzens believed that if there were to be a community in Deadwood, they would need a place to meet.

Using volunteer labor and funded by government rural community grants, the two were instrumental in the building of the Deadwood Community Center.

When they ran out of steam, Mary

Lou says, the center received help from neighbor Bob Dodge to complete the project.

Ernie, also an artist, died in 2004. Mary Lou says he was an excellent listener.

“Ernie could listen and really hear what others were saying,” she says. “He was a peacemaker and could get people who didn’t want to talk to each other anymore to make up. Someone might tell him it was none of his business, and he’d say, ‘In a community, it is all of our business. We have to find ways to agree.’ He had a dry sense of humor. That’s how I fell in love with him. We had 53 years together.”

Mary Lou’s artistic talents were first nurtured as a second-grader at the Horace Mann School in New York. Her father had moved the family from Kansas as he was pursuing a master’s degree.

At school, Mary Lou says she was exposed to big doses of pottery, drawing and painting. The teachers told her father always to keep art supplies available to aid Mary Lou’s artistic development.

Music and singing were also a big part of her life. Now, Mary Lou says, her hearing is a challenge.

“I had the pleasure of singing in the great cathedrals of Europe in college,” Mary Lou says. “Those were wonderful moments of my life. Once, in Switzerland, I was the soloist for the song, ‘There is a Balm in Gilead.’ Afterward, a man stood and asked us to sing it again. I’ve been blessed with that, and now I’m in the Beethoven Club with my deafness. I admire Helen Keller. She enjoyed life with no sound, no sight. She is as much of an inspiration as there is.”

Since Ernie’s death, Mary Lou has lost her interest in making art. She says she has drawn her life and its experiences



**A picture of the Deadwood one-room school before it became Mary Lou Goertzen’s home.**

already.

“I meditate a lot and have really good sleep and good dreams,” she says. “The sleeping is more interesting, and Ernie is in many of my dreams. I am counting my blessings.”

Within an hour, Mary Lou quotes Thomas Merton, Gertrude Stein, Fred Rogers, Thich Nhat Hanh, Rumi and even the comic strip Pogo.

Mary Lou’s love for peace and harmony has never swayed.

“I try to imagine that I am putting peace down with every step as much as possible,” she says. “I count as I breathe in peace, and breathe out peace and love to the world, even to those filled with hate and hurt. There is so much hate out there in the world. There always has been, but there is a new chapter of it now. Mr. Rogers said that if we knew the stories that people have, we wouldn’t hate them. We would understand.

“My interest now is to connect to other people, to realize that we are all in the human family. It has nothing to do with the color of skin or where we come from, and everything to do with the spirit that we all live.” ■



Signs of creativity and handiwork fill Mary Lou's schoolhouse home with life.