

A Portrait of the (Saskatchewan) Artist

By Dave Yanko

Art and business often reside on opposite sides of the street. But Regina-area artist Kimberly Kiel is bridging that divide by blending a business background with a passion for painting. Her stellar results have convinced her that all budding artists can benefit by learning how to run a business.

"I tell any artist starting out to take a business class and really, really approach what you're doing as a business," says Kiel. "I tell them you need to be aware of the relationships you're forging, you need to be

aware of what you can offer, and you need to be aware of when you can deliver it."

Kiel, who graduated in 1994 with a business administration degree from the University of Regina, also makes a point of reminding young artists there are many flavours of ice cream because not everybody likes vanilla. "It's my way of saying not everybody's going to like your art. You need to get over that."

Not everybody appreciates their financial advisor, either. But Kiel developed a thick

skin for that inevitability during 10 years in the business, first in Regina and later in Calgary. It was in the latter locale in 2003 that she decided to sell her financial advising practice and just take a break.

"It had gotten to the point where that skin just really didn't fit me anymore," says Kiel, adding health problems exacerbated the situation. "I was at the point where I was not interested, whatsoever, in what the stock market was doing."

She says she gave herself permission to

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Regina-area artist Kimberly Kiel

Photo by Keith Moulding

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take a few months off before making any decisions about her future. On the advice of a friend, meanwhile, she signed up for an art class that just happened to begin the day after she left her financial advisor practice. The class was once a week in the back of a Calgary art store, but Kiel fast became an almost permanent fixture at the facility, visiting three days a week.

"It was incredibly liberating. I absolutely loved it," says Kiel, who has no special educational grounding in the arts.

Today, her paintings sell for between \$400 and \$11,000, they're shown in galleries across Canada and in Switzerland, and she's so busy she has enlisted members of her family to help her keep up with demand. Her mother paints the edges of her canvasses, her sister-in-law and brother look after shipping and both her husband and father have stretched canvas for her, although that's now handled by another party. She and her husband are also raising

two young boys on their acreage near Balgonie.

"It's the Elton John principle," says Kiel, who's been sensing a growing entrepreneurial spirit in the province since returning about six years ago. "Elton John sings and he has other people that do all the other things. I'm trying to outsource as much as I can."

Kiel's impressionistic style involves the use of wide brushes, a palette knife and oil paint to create textured and boldly coloured works that often feature floral themes or elegantly attired human figures in socializing poses. Her work has become more textured over the years as she employs layering and other techniques to make her pigments stand out above the surface of the canvass. Sheet music, cheesecloth, burlap and gold leaf are among the materials she has incorporated into her paintings for texture and effect.

Kiel's talent was apparent to fellow art students and mentors right from the

beginning; however, serendipity played a big part in her commercial success. The spouse of a former business colleague put her in touch with a person who was opening a furniture and design store in Calgary and he agreed to sell her paintings from his shop. Then another furniture and design business in Canmore, Alberta agreed to sell her work and that fruitful relationship lasted 10 years.

Kiel admits her passion for painting may be a little greater now than her passion for business – she's at a point in her career where gallery owners and others handle many of the business details. But that hasn't changed her perspective about art as business.

"Paintings are my product, even if they're a very personal product. And in order to keep painting, I have to get them to the people who might be interested in buying them."

Produced by: Saskatchewan Business Magazine
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For subscription information, call: (306) 787-4765
Distributed as an insert of Saskatchewan Business and mailed to over 6,000 Saskatchewan businesses.

Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to:
Ministry of the Economy
300-2103 11th Avenue
Regina, SK S4P 3Z8

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Published quarterly, Publication Mail Agreement Number 40065736