



Into the Woods

Artist Tracie Noles-Ross and her family are living and learning from the land.

by Rebecca Walden
Photos and artwork provided
by the Noles-Ross Family



Left: New bees emerging. Right: Harvested honey



Tanzi and Zaida with one of the cochins

Most stress is of our own making. If you doubt this statement, spend just five minutes talking with Tracie Noles-Ross. Embracing the concept of permaculture and the simple abundance of self-sufficiency, this Roebuck-area Renaissance woman — a painter, sculptor, gardener, beekeeper and mother, to name but a few of her roles — is living a life delightfully out of sync with what many would define as the American Dream. “Everything in my house is probably makeshift or found or reassembled,” Noles-Ross says, as she describes one of her latest projects — making a quilt out of old blue jeans, and then re-upholstering her sofa with it. “But I’d rather do that than go to a job and be away from the kids.”

Adaptable and easygoing, Noles-Ross and her husband, Olsen, have created their own utopia on a 5-acre farm in Roebuck,

where they are raising their daughters, Tanzi, 9 and Zaida, 6.

“I hope that our life here in this place where we are surrounded by woods and meadows, where we encourage and maintain wildlife habitats as well as tend our animals offers the kids some connection to nature,” Noles-Ross says. “We have dogs, cats, rabbits, chickens and bees. There are a lot to care for here.” (The family also grows walnuts, hickory nuts, blueberries, blackberries and strawberries, as well as vegetables).

“Drawing the planet earth on a paper plate on Earth Day and talking about living green lives is all well and good but I don’t think it’s enough,” she says. “I hope [our home environment] teaches them that they are part of nature and that it isn’t something separate from us humans outside of our daily lives.”

For Noles-Ross, this is also a lesson in which she continues to immerse herself as a visual artist. “There are almost always underlying themes of interconnectedness in my work now,” she says. “It is about holistic living and the joys and worries of daily life. The more slowly and deliberately we live our lives here, the more direct my narratives have become.

“Watching a child build a fairy house from tree bark and berries while sitting out in the sun inspires a different sort of storytelling than the introspective tales I spun in my younger days. The stories I tell now also rely on the quiet and tiny details of my external life. My children have given me a new perspective on everything.

“Though it may not appear outwardly so, I also see this work as political in nature. I am addressing social issues. I am struggling within my head as I learn to raise a family in this crazy consumerist society. I hope mine is a voice, small as it may be in a noisy world, encouraging thoughtfulness and appreciation for nature and family.”

One practical way Noles-Ross is giving voice to this passionate belief is through the family’s farm. “It’s like the house that Jack built,” she says. “I now have enough fresh eggs to feed my family, and my dogs and cats. The garden also feeds us, my dogs, my rabbits and my chickens. We all give a little and we get a little in return. The dogs guard the hens. The rabbits and hens contribute good soil-making byproducts to my compost heap for the garden. We humans plant, tend and harvest the garden, the bees pollinate the plants and then the cycle starts all over.

“We have more control about what we put on the dinner table each night. We pay less for food, and the time we spend tending our gardens and animals is time spent together in the garden and not in a line at the grocery store or the queue of a fast-food restaurant, and that feels so right and good.”

For Tanzi and Zaida, the farm is more of a wonderland where the girls, who are home-schooled, can cook, explore and discover the countless delights of their environment.

“They aren’t picky kids that ask for mac and cheese and tubes of blue yogurt for lunch every day,” Noles-Ross says. “My kids can run out into our garden and pick some fresh broccoli or berries and herbs, stop by the



Tracie with Hedwig, the Rooster



chicken coop for fresh eggs from the chickens that they help care for and then bring it in and cook their own breakfast. They drizzle honey they helped extract from our hives on blueberries, blackberries and strawberries that they helped plant and harvest, and they beam while doing it. They have pride in these skills and can really tell the difference in the quality of the food they eat at home and the food we are offered elsewhere.”

For Noles-Ross, the role of motherhood is one that blended beautifully with her role as an artist influenced by her environment.

“I never set aside my paints when I became a mother,” she says. “On the contrary, I think my creative juices were revived after I brought my daughter home. I made more art in that first year of motherhood than I had in the previous five. I felt I had more purpose in life, and she was a great studio companion.

“The girls were always with me. I never took them to my mom’s or got a sitter to paint. There would be a quilt on the floor, and they would crawl around and play with my art supplies. They would color stuff and hang it on the wall next to mine. (Tanzi) drew on the backs of the paintings. These paintings were sold, and people have these child scribbles on the back.

“I did change the materials I used in the studio. I started using more paper and watercolors. I eventually started using beeswax as a collage and sculpting medium so it would be safer for Tanzi to be in my work space. She could play with remnants of my work without worry, and we hung her doodles next to

mine on the wall. From the day she joined our family, art was a part of her life, and it still is today.”

“It’s the same with my youngest daughter,” Noles-Ross says. “She has boxes of her own supplies, and she sits and works with me all of the time. We have sculptures made from goodies from the recycling bin, and paintings, drawings and handmade books sit alongside mine all over the house. It is who I am — who we are. It has always been impor-



tant to me that my daughters see me working. I am not a Sunday painter. They know this. They see me rushing to meet deadlines. They ride with me to deliver art to galleries. They assist when I pack and ship my work. They respect and appreciate that this is how I make a living. I hope my example helps instill some sense of a good work ethic.”

Indeed, the artist’s children are not only absorbing her creative instincts but also her resourcefulness. In addition to using beeswax as sculpting material, the clever Earth mama also uses it to make lip balms and lo-

tions. Tracie’s husband, Olsen, a schoolteacher, makes his own contribution to their homeschooling efforts. For Noles-Ross, teaching opportunities are endless, and they blend seamlessly with the permaculture-oriented lifestyle practiced so deliberately by the Ross clan. “We listen to music and audiobooks while I am painting,” she says, adding that much painting is now done at the kitchen table, or in a 5 x 7 sketchbook on the go.

“Because I’m a visual artist I don’t have to think too much about it,” she says. “Once I establish a thesis or series theme, once I establish the boundaries of that, I don’t have to be totally present to complete it. My hands are always moving, while I’m reading something to my kids or my kids are reading to me. I can cook dinner while they ask me questions about something. They can read chapters to me while I’m painting. We don’t have structured school time. We do have structure, but it is our own brand.”

As for what’s next for the sustainability-focused artist? Perhaps it’s a new way of thinking about an old hobby. During a recent exhibition with the Alabama State Council on the Arts, Noles-Ross arrived to find enlarged excerpts from her personal blog hung alongside her art (thanks to the creative thinking of visual arts program manager Georgine Clarke).

“It really changed the way my work is presented, and it’s made me rethink how I want to display my work,” she says. “For the first time in my career, I’m thinking a book might be something to consider. The intimate aspect of a book on a wall just makes sense in the way I live my life now.” •



Tracie with husband, Olsen. Photo by Zaida Noles-Ross

