

Artfelt

When it came time to change careers, Joneses migrated to their love of art

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Opening an art gallery can take the faith of a blind cashier and the guts of a cliff diver.

In a pinch, customers will find that painting or sculpture likely will come in second to necessities, such as food, clothing and shelter. And although there are great deals on original art out there, it also can call for an investment requiring a payment plan.

Starting and succeeding in just about any business is a challenge. But as artists and those who represent them know, survival in this particular field of endeavor can be daunting.

So it's not surprising that many people who open art galleries do it because they're following their hearts. This is certainly the case with Laura Jones and her husband, Robert "Rob" N. Jones, who opened Migration: A Gallery in Charlottesville in April.

The Joneses each found success in other careers before venturing into their new joint enterprise. She initially worked as an attorney and then became a health/fitness instructor. He started out working in art galleries and museums, but when that became too much of a "challenge financially," he became a security analyst.

When the couple moved from Atlanta to Charlottesville six years ago, the furthest thing from their minds was opening an art gallery. But their lifelong passions for art started them thinking about doing just that this past holiday season.

It was the day after Christmas and the couple was relaxing in the living room of Laura Jones's childhood home in Chapel Hill, N.C.

"I think it was Laura who first said,

'Let's open an art gallery,' " Rob Jones said as he flashed a smile toward his wife, who was sitting behind the gallery's business desk. "It was one of those things where you say, 'Yeah, cool. That would be great.'

"But when we woke up the next morning and then the next, it still sounded like a good idea. We talked to a number of people about it, and nobody discouraged us.

"We heard a few of them say, 'Boy, you're brave,' but that was said with a sort of smile and a wink. It was like they were really saying, 'Good for you.' We felt in our hearts that it was the right thing to do."

Making such a life-altering decision wasn't as much a knee-jerk reaction as it might sound. Art has long been a major part of both their lives and much of their leisure time is spent touring art galleries near and far.

"A big part of the inspiration for opening the gallery came from a trip to Santa Fe, where we immersed ourselves in galleries," Laura Jones said. "There were some fantastic galleries in Atlanta, and the visit to Santa Fe made me realize how much I missed the emotional punch of seeing really great art.

"Not that there aren't great galleries and artists here in Charlottesville. But it made me think that if I missed having a lot of galleries to go to, maybe other people living here did as well, because Charlottesville is such a cosmopolitan city.

"So we thought: Why not bring some of the art here that we have seen and loved?"

The new gallery is at the corner of Fifth and Water streets. Its clean lines and engaging warmth impressed Leah Stoddard, director of Second Street Gallery, the moment she walked in.

"I was struck immediately by the professionalism and the clarity of presentation of the gallery," said Stoddard, who has directed the nonprofit Second Street gallery since 2000. "And Laura is very engaging and knowledgeable.

"I just felt very welcome, as did everyone else at that opening. And what I was seeing in terms of art was very exciting and interesting.

"It's wonderful and thrilling to see a whole group of new artists that our community might not be familiar with."

The professional layout Stoddard lauded is a reflection of Rob Jones' formal art training. His undergraduate degree from the University of Texas is in art history, and he earned a graduate certificate in museum administration from Harvard University.

Like parents, like daughter

Laura Jones got her love of art from her parents, who continue to be avid art collectors.

"My father is a professor and a lawyer, and he used to do legal work on the side for artists and he got paid in art," Laura Jones said. "When I was growing up, I thought I lived in the most eclectic, weird house ever.

"For example, in our living room there was [and still is] a giant white egg that was cut in half and has mirrors on the insides. The house was jam-packed with incredible cutting-edge modern art from the 1960s and '70s.

"I have no formal school training in art, but a lifetime of looking and living with it."

Laura Jones said when they moved to Charlottesville she knew she wanted to do something other than practice law. Her interest in all things related to sports resulted in her getting a job at Atlantic Coast Athletic Club, where she primarily created exercise programs for older adults.

Her work time now is dedicated to the gallery and writing her biweekly column, "Fitness Frontiers," which appears in Sunday editions of The Daily Progress. Her husband continues to work full time at the local law firm of Michie Hamlett Lowry Rasmussen and Tweel PLLC.

Rob Jones works at the gallery when his day job permits. He's as enthusiastic about the business as his wife is.

"Laura put it best when we were in the throes of pre-opening and literally working around the clock painting, building, sanding and whatnot," Rob Jones said as their two dogs, Odin and Piper, moseyed about the studio. "At some point she looked over at me and said, 'This gallery is who we are. This is what we're supposed to be doing.'

"What I love about art is the way it can move people, and you never know what will touch an individual. Having the gallery provides us with an amazing opportunity to be able to watch people come in, gravitate toward a work and see how it moves them and how they connect with it.

"Being able to provide that experience is very special for us. Hopefully, we can provide visitors with the opportunity to see art that moves them, and help them be able to purchase it, put it in their home and enjoy it for many years to come."

The Joneses said from the time they made the decision to open the gallery, things started falling into place. They found a location they loved and, just as importantly, were able to amass a stable of established artists from around the country whose work they were familiar with and believe in.

A look at 22 new artists

The gallery represents 22 artists, and that number could eventually grow to around 30. Whether the artist is nationally known or just emerging onto the art scene, his or her inclusion in the gallery always is based on whether or not the owners believe in their work.

"I was never a business or salesperson, but it's always easy to sell or communicate about something that means a lot to you," Laura Jones said. "Of course, there's no guarantees, but we feel all the work here will have historical significance.

"Visually the work has to grab us and hold our attention. If it makes our head snap around, that's sort of the first test. The second test is, if on closer inspection it has the craftsmanship, technique and skill necessary to make us feel we can represent it as top-quality work.

"The third thing is what I call the guestroom test. Is this someone we would want to stay in our guestroom? If it is, I feel we can much more easily sell their work."

When the Joneses asked Suzanne Howes-Stevens to be one of their featured artists they had to pass a test as well. The Connecticut-based artist has earned a national reputation for her trademark technique of painting marshes and wetland scenes over topographical and nautical maps.

"Laura and Rob contacted me several times and, at first, I thought no, no, no," Howes-Stevens said during a recent telephone interview from her home. "It was too far away, and I had my work in eight galleries already.

"I got hooked because their mission statement is so wonderful, and it fits so well with what I'm trying to do, which is bring attention to how fragile and precious our environment is. So I thought I just had to do this.

"My husband and I drove down and met them, and they were so enthusiastic and knowledgeable about art. And I loved the other artists they're representing, too, so I felt right away that it was a perfect place for me."

The stated mission of Migration is "to discover, promote and place art which transforms the viewer through the work's exploration of our changing and evolving relationships with nature, each other and our own souls."

The gallery was named Migration because the Joneses feel that "creating, viewing and possessing beautiful, meaningful art takes us on a transformative journey."

You've got to believe

According to Howes-Stevens, "it's everything" to have one's work shown in a high-quality gallery by people who truly believe in and care about it. Her paintings hang in galleries such as Lanoue Fine Arts in Boston and Kathryn Markel Fine Arts in New York City, as well as in numerous public and private collections.

"There's a feeling throughout that gallery that I'm sure people get when they're in there that it's all about the work," said Howes-Stevens, who with her sculptor husband, John Stevens, started and ran the fine arts program at Manchester Community College in Connecticut for many years before her retirement in 1997.

"It looks like they have pursued work they can feel very passionate about. I don't think they're showing anyone just because they think they're moneymakers, and a lot of galleries do that."

Howes-Stevens realizes that many galleries have to have their "sellers" simply to survive. When asked if it takes courage to open an art gallery, her response was immediate and heartfelt.

"Oh, Lord," Howes-Stevens said. "I'm shocked that anybody would even think of opening an art gallery, I really am."

"It's so difficult to probably pay the rent, let alone earn anything. I think gallery owners like Laura and Rob just have such a passion for what they do that somehow they're able to not look at that part of it."

"I'm sure they're pragmatic and good business people, but I don't think anybody ever goes into running a gallery for money, because if that happens it's a fluke. But I think they'll do fine because the art in their gallery is very high quality."

Visitors to Migration will find a wide range of art that includes paintings, jewelry, sculpture and photography. Rob Jones said embracing all the different types of art came naturally to them, because they feel art is art regardless of the medium.

Through Oct. 5, Migration will be featuring an exhibit titled "Film Photography Now." The two-person show features the works of photographers Peter Filene and Alan Dehmer.

If enthusiasm for the new gallery is any indication of its ultimate success, it should do very well. The Joneses said they have been "astounded" by the good words and responses they have gotten, as well as the support they've received from the artistic community.

The couple never fostered any illusions that their business venture was going to be easy. But they've learned that following one's heart can pay big dividends in happiness and a sense of fulfillment.

"It still requires a lot of courage to keep the doors open, but people have been really nice," Laura Jones said with a laugh. "Of course, we want this to be a viable business, but we also want to bring high-quality art to Charlottesville.

"I remember the relief I felt the moment we made the final decision to open the gallery. As scary as it was to make that leap, I felt in my heart that it was the right thing to do."

Migration: A Gallery is at 119 Fifth St., S.E., a block south of the Downtown Mall. It's open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. on First Fridays and by appointment on Sunday and Monday. For further information, visit www.migrationgallery.com or call (434) 293-2200.

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