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Just another banner day at the beach. Photo: Ryan Moser

MURAL COMPASS

How does Kim Cowen stay happy? She just follows her art.

Painter. Photographer. Sculptor. Sign-maker. Traveler. Teacher.... Kim Cowen — thirty-something, sun-kissed blonde mom of two — must have a tough time answering that tired old dinner party icebreaker, “So what do you do?” What she has no trouble answering, however, is a question that far too few ask instead: “And what makes you happy?”

“Of course, my kids are pretty high on the list, and I love teaching,” Cowen says. “Other than that? I’d be pretty happy just sitting on a beach somewhere, stringing shells together.”

But in her actual life, Cowen has a lot going on — a grab bag of pursuits that all came about naturally as she followed her heart

from one creative enterprise to the next.

Her Kill Devil Hills home is a multicolored collage of idiosyncratic creations and various inspirations. Bookshelves feature titles on both oceanography and Salvador Dali. Walls boast hand-painted surfboards and vintage guitars. Art includes reclaimed wood furniture she builds with her husband and her daughter’s maps of the world. Works-in-progress range from travel photos printed on metal and waiting to be framed with beach fencing — “I like the rustic feel” — to oversized wedding invitations that look like vintage cartography.

She holds up a hand-drawn illustration of the Rhode Island coast with a couple’s names, and RSVP details in flowing script.

“I had five cousins get married this year, and I started drawing these maps for them,” she says. “This one was actually featured in a Newport wedding magazine.”

Now she’s doing similar designs for total strangers. Which is pretty much how every new venture starts — a conversation with a family member or friend sparks an idea, which then becomes a creative outburst. That’s how she got into painting large murals, banners and signs — sometimes 20 or 30 feet wide — in bulk for festivals, including her favorite music festival, FloydFest.

In 2002, FloydFest was a backwoods secret in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Today, this July favorite is a thriving, four-day affair, with multiple stages, and more

than 100 musicians playing everything from rock to bluegrass, reggae to folk to zydeco — plus artists and storytellers and as many as 13,000 fans.

"I've been to every single one," says the self-professed music junkie. "All sixteen of them."

But Cowen was never just an attendee. She worked the grounds selling coffee, so she got to know the production people. And, of course, she talked to them about art and how they could improve the look of the festival.

The next thing she knew, they had loaded her up with work. They asked her to make stage signs, directional signs, signs for the woods, signs for the general store, signs for the bathrooms, signs for the beer gardens... and on and on. Then she needed to finish them fast.

"I only had a couple of months to get it all done. And they were massive, on plywood. I had to make frames and everything, and I had to get the style right," Cowen says. "But they gave me complete creative freedom, and I knew the festival really well, so I had fun designing and creating. Then I hired a bunch of helpers. We all got paid in VIP tickets."

Since then, she's done signage for Corolla's Mustang Music Festival and Mustang Spring Jam — plus beer-fests from Pirate's Cove to Northern Virginia. She's also designed logos and artwork for individual bands and businesses. But sign-making is no easy venture. It can take over Cowen's life for weeks at a time — or at least her backyard — which is often covered in boards, paints and tarps until the very last minute.

There are other challenges, too — like occasionally pleasing the corporate powers that be. One craft brewery was worried she'd screw up the branding, so she went out and bought a projector, then recreated the logo in perfect, 20-foot detail.

"I just wish I had bought the thing sooner for the other festivals!" she laughs. "But it was still tough. I was out there at night, painting, trying to get the logo just right — and the projector drew a lot of mosquitoes!"

“SIGN-MAKING IS NO EASY VENTURE. IT CAN TAKE OVER COWEN'S LIFE FOR WEEKS AT A TIME.”

Where does Cowen get the energy and creative drive necessary to paint 130 signs so quickly?

Perhaps it's genetic. Turns out, her great-grandfather was a sign painter in Rhode Island. Another great-grandfather was an oil painter. And her great-aunt Eunice was an art history teacher who took Cowen's mother traveling around the world.

Or perhaps it comes from a lifetime of leaping at whatever sparks her interest, and doing her best to "make a living" without losing her passion.

"I taught art when I lived in Norfolk," she says. "I discovered that I love teaching. Now I wouldn't give that up."

As a Montessori teacher, it's clear Cowen approaches crafting children's minds with the same level of loving attention that she gives her art, as she raves about her class of six- to nine-year olds' recent success in fundraising.

"We set out to purchase ten water filters for Waves for Water, and it just grew and grew. Now, we have over 45 filters and 30-to-40 boxes of supplies to send to Puerto Rico for hurricane relief."

Or perhaps it all just aligns with Cowen's simple philosophy of "do the things that bring you joy."

"If I could go back, I guess I'd tell myself to keep going with things that make you happy and get out of things that don't make you happy — whatever doesn't soothe your soul. Oh...and I'd probably tell myself that graphic design would be a smart major."

— Dave Holton 

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