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Old School, New School

Thanks to a grant from the city, *la vieille école* at **83 Sherman Street** is now an upscale urban art colony opening doors to artists and their patrons.

STORY & PHOTOS BY DIANE HUDSON

Imagine being an artist living in Portland and owning an affordable home and studio. And if you do decide to leave, you will be instrumental in helping another artist find such enviable space in a city where it is all but disappearing.

Artist Wendy Kindred, painter and printmaker, jumped on this dreamy opportunity. Having finished a 26-year career as an instructor in the arts at the University of Maine at Fort Kent in 2003 to begin a life devoted full-time to her art, Kindred discovered macular degeneration setting in and decided, "It was time to move to where I won't have to drive. My father had it; I know what's coming."

ARTISTS AT WORK



Tracy Ginn

She could have gone back to her beginnings in Detroit, or possibly Lewiston (she likes the growing diversity), but an ad in the *Maine Sunday Telegram* for an “unbelievably lower priced” home in an “artists-only” building in Portland determined her fate.

Arriving here in 2006, she met developer Peter Bass, who had created East Bayside



J. Felice Boucher

Studios, loft-style artist condos on Anderson Street, in 2002. Bass took her, one of the first buyers, through **Parkside Studios**, the former **Sacred Heart School** on Sherman Street, where he'd won the bid to design and create space for artists' purchase and use.

“This is the one you should have, he said to me,” Kindred marvels, as we stand (me in awe) in the pristine 700-plus square foot space with glistening hardwood floors and a view out over Back Cove seen through a full wall of nearly floor-to-ceiling windows. Wow!

“The clincher for me was the basement studio that goes with this unit—well lit and with hot and cold running water.”

Displaying her credentials as a visual artist was no problem for Kindred, who at the time was enjoying a solo show at the Lewis Gallery in Portland. Having studied art at the University of Chicago from 1955 to 1963 and subsequently in Europe and New York, Kindred



had written and illustrated four children's books and had widely exhibited throughout Maine as well as in Chicago and Indiana, and Ethiopia when she lived there for a time.

And what is the cost of living here? “It varies per artist, but for me: \$200 condo fee per month, approximately \$800 a year for heat and \$400 for electricity. The mortgage, including insurance and taxes, is \$1,100 a month.” (Taxes per unit are approximately \$2,700.)

Showing me some of her earlier works as we move around her welcoming living space full of colorful canvases and interesting artifacts, Kindred reminisces. “Teaching and showing art in Ethiopia (1964-1969) put me in the center of an international art world.” In her studio, pausing at one of her works in progress, she observes, “So much of my earlier painting was deliberately flat and brightly colored. Now I am loving the illusions of volume and space that go with painting what's on the table by the window in my studio. Also, with the changes in my eyesight, just seeing and capturing what holds still in front of me is tricky enough.”

Kindred leads the way through

So You Call Yourself an Artist?

Built in the 1927, the former **Sacred Heart School at 83 Sherman Street** was later acquired by the City of Portland. In 2000, the city sold the building—after installing a new roof and bringing the hallways up to code—at a reduced rate to developer Peter Bass, whose company won the bid to design and create eight loft spaces for purchase and use by artists.

Thanks to partnership with the city, the units' prices remain low due to deed restrictions limiting their sale to buyers with income 80 percent or less than the median home buyer.

The owners enter a financial agreement that limits the amount of equity their condo accrues during their tenure. Strict guidelines require that initial as well as succeeding occupants qualify as visual artists.



David Johanson



Wendy Kindred

the building to meet some other artists: “We’re like cats, each going our separate direction,” she says as we begin what feels like a magical mystery tour.

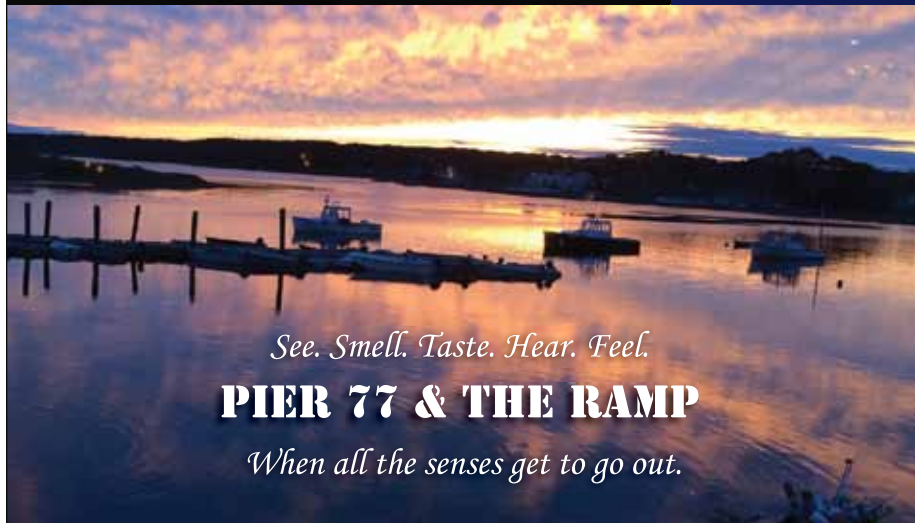
Jay LaBrie, resident since 2006, has painted since his early childhood in Frenchville, Maine. “Art was not taught in public schools when I was growing up, so I took private lessons from artists in the area, including Canadian artist Claude Picard and Lily Michaud at the University of Maine at Fort Kent.”

Attending a commercial art school—Butera School of Art in Boston—convinced him that “that was not for me.” He learned about Parkside Studios through a client (Jay has also been a hairdresser in Portland since 1969). His studio and condo walls are covered head to toe with his brilliantly colorful paintings, spanning an entire gamut from landscapes (many inspired by yearly visits to childhood haunts in the St. John Valley) to coastal scenes, still lifes, and portraits. “I complete a painting a day,” he tells us, barely keeping the brush from the vellum sheet he is working on—with acrylics—while we speak.

Cathleen Mahan, since 2006, says “Art school for me was not a choice. It was an internal imperative. When my father suddenly dropped dead (I was 22), I bought a camera. Making the images was healing for me. Then, when I was 33, my mother was diagnosed with cancer and died 4 months later.” Mahan,



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ARTISTS AT WORK

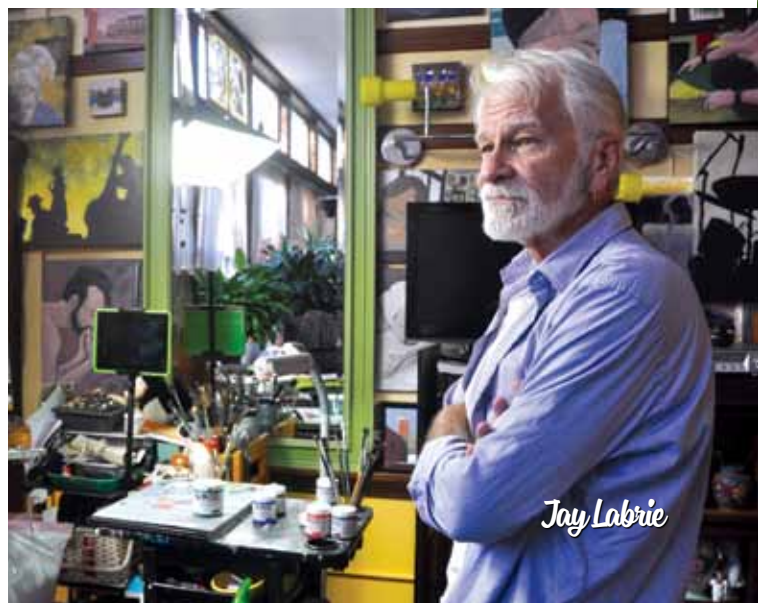
pursuing a career as a critical-care nurse at the time, knew she had to “right the course.” She quit a lucrative job in Worcester, Massachusetts, slashed expenses, and pursued studies in clay and drawing at the Kansas City Art Institute (BFA) and Cranbrook Academy of Art (MFA) in Michigan, at one point apprenticing at Cranbrook with instructor/mentor Tony Hepburn.

“What a gift to be able to see the world from an artistic perspective. My soul always did, but I needed help.” Prior to Parkside Studios, Mahan was living with her sister, also an artist, in Portland, and traveling to Sawyer Street Studios in South Portland for her work in clay, when she saw an ad in a free weekly.

“Having a studio right here where I live and my own kiln to use is ideal.” Recent exhibits include a National Endowment for the Arts show in Washington, DC, and at the WEX Global Gallery in South Portland. Among her community-outreach projects is “Raising our Voices: The Stories of Parkside,” in Portland and an intergenerational project in York.

David Itchkawich, since 2007, has a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design, where he was a European Honors Program student in Rome and Florence. He exhibits yearly at the Greenwich Village Art Show in New York, and in multiple collections including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Smith College Museum of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and Syracuse University Art Gallery.

After working briefly in advertising and illustration (*The New York Times*, *Harpers*, *Intellectual Digest*, *Chicago Daily News*), Itchkawitz turned to etching and drawing. “I enjoy making up images out of my own imagination. I call them ‘illustrations for unwritten stories,’” he says, showing me a piece he is working on depicting Superman flying in for a landing at the church just outside his windows. Some soldiers from the Roman army are gathered around the steps.



When Itchkawich heard about Parkside Studios, he had a house on Peaks Island and was living part time in New York City, working as a cab driver. He seized the opportunity. “I couldn’t live with the ferry schedule. Here, I was given a chance to make my own world. You get a raw classroom with these really high ceilings; you can do what you want, and it’s affordable. This is the most like a city that Maine has. People talk about Parkside as if it’s the Bronx, but I love it here. And, I have parking! I didn’t become disillusioned with New York, but I certainly am happier here.”

Tracy Ginn, since 2010, is a 1983 MECA BFA graduate. She comes from a Connecticut family with theater and art backgrounds; she now teaches, as well as creates, fine art. “I’m lucky to love kids, love art, love teaching, and my job.”

Describing her paintings: “I use a Megilp glazing technique popular with Flemish and Renaissance painters. This painting style incorporates small amounts of color in clear

glazes washed over selected areas of the artwork, resulting in a luminous color brilliance. Many of my paintings develop from Polaroid snapshots which, combined with the old-school glazing technique, ignite a fluid hybrid of playful color.”

Ginn talks about the practical aspects of the studios. “Although the city kicks in, all artists buy condos at market rate, and investment is not spectacular as appreciation is capped at present market rate. The space feels more like Tribeca than Parkside. The architects of 1927 built it as solid as Fort Knox. We feel blessed that it’s affordable.

“We are a unique and wonderful group of homo sapiens. Under one enclosed roof, the ol’ middle school cafeteria formula is bound to surface—especially among artists, where extremes of extroversion and introversion can create a very dynamic emotional barometer!”

Ginn will partner with artist Richard Wilson in January in a group show sponsored by University of Southern Maine (USM) and Union of Maine Visual Artists, to be exhibited at the Area Gallery on USM’s Portland campus.



Michelle Sollier

Joanne Felice Boucher, since 2008, is another Maine College of Art graduate. As a fine art and commercial photographer who works seven days a week most of the year, Boucher says, “My fine art work keeps me interested in my everyday commercial work.” From the awards she’s recently earned, she appears to have mastered the formula.

She was named 2015 Maine Photographer of the Year (she’s a six-time winner) and 2015 New England Photographer of the Year. She took first and second place in Portraits in the Professional Photographer of America (PPA), North East District Print Competition, and PPA Diamond Photographer of the Year.

Boucher’s studio unit was the last to be occupied. She paid \$153,000 in 2008 (Jay LaBrie paid \$135,000 in 2006) and has just re-sold her unit. “The property is not meant to be an investment but an affordable living space for artists in Portland. So you don’t make a profit when selling, especially if you put money into your space.” Why the move? “To be closer to my family (in Brunswick) and have a back yard for my dog.” She also says she’s weary of the drug issue in the Portland downtown area.

David Johanson, since 2012. “Neon Dave” studied Humanities and Painting at New College of Florida, and neon art at the National Neon Institute in Venetia, California.

“I wanted to have my own shop,” Johanson says when asked about his settling here.

“I’d worked all over, in California, New York, Boston, Texas. Portland just had this buzz to it. I’d spent summers in Maine, and it just seemed a better place for me than New York City.” As to why neon, “I was in the graphics field and wanted something more



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ARTISTS AT WORK

hands-on, less computer. And I can use it in my art as well as have a trade." Isn't it dangerous? "Well, you don't want to break it up and smell it! Seriously, though, in the processing stage, when you're using extremely high voltage, death is quite possible." And "you get cuts and burns, and you just have to keep working."

He keeps a separate studio for processing but uses Parkside Studios for final stages of assembly.

Michelle Leier, since 2015. She learned about the Studios from an MLS listing. The Minnesota native has a BA from Northwestern and an MFA from Massachusetts College of Art (MCA). She spent four years teaching art at an international school in Slovakia. "Weekends, I'd take the train from Bratislava to Vienna, a one-hour trip, and go to all the amazing museums (Kunst Historisches Museum, the Belvedere, the Albertina, the Succession, the Leopold, and the Essl) and study the great paintings. Painters in Europe are so revered they're part of the National identity."

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She came to Portland and loved it, but “I had to move twice from apartments due to rising costs.” Then came Parkside Studios.

“Everything fell into place. I couldn’t have dreamt up a more perfect solution.” Having a studio separate from her living space is a boon. “Oil painting requires a space with ventilation, and I have that here.”

Michelle Soulier, barely moved in.

The 2004 MECA grad has owned Green Hand Bookstore on Congress Street since 2009. Her household includes husband Tristan Gallagher (owner of Coast City Comics & Fun Box Monster Emporium) and their two cats. Her work (both written and drawn) is “driven by curiosity, inspired by many things, including [H.P.] Lovecraft, New England history, and illuminated manuscripts.” When not at the bookstore, she immerses herself in her studio, working in graphite, watercolor, and ink.

Soulier is also editor of the *Strange Maine Gazette* and its companion blog, which inspired her first book, *Strange Maine: True Tales from the Pine Tree State*. ■

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