

taking **peace** to heart

by Michelle Roberts

Lucy Ogletree's whimsical paintings reflect a simple life, drawing inspiration from the folk artist's memories of growing up in the rural community of Thamesville, Ontario.

In the pieces, cats dance beneath a moonlit sky, angels float with heart-shaped balloons and quaint houses sit nestled amid evergreens and roses.

But the painting that most closely reflects the soul of its artist is the one that shows two women holding hands. One figure stands in a gray forest with dead trees that drip the words "despair, hopeless, lonely." The other stands in a field of color blooming the words, "peaceful, joyful, hopeful."

Ogletree, 54, painted that work several years ago for the therapist who helped her escape more than four decades of depression and anxiety.

"That painting is my counselor and me," explains Ogletree, who now lives in Sparta, Ontario, with her husband, Mike Roberts, 62. "I painted that for her because I wanted her to know how I felt. I painted because I couldn't find the words."

Ogletree traces her depression back to when she was 5 years old. That year, her father was killed in an automobile accident.

"I felt lonely," she recalls. "I felt different. I felt afraid all the time, not knowing that what I was feeling was actually anxiety. I felt like I was looking

mother's father [died by] suicide when she was 5, so there seems to be a strong biological link."

years of pain

Ogletree's feelings of fear, sadness and isolation intensified as she entered her teenage years, and art became one of her primary comforts. She remembers spending long hours alone, drawing and making sock puppets.

As an adult, Ogletree's art became her livelihood. In 1987, she started a business selling handcrafted folk items, including corn husk dolls and grapevine wreaths. Still, depression and anxiety eroded her self-confidence and she didn't feel in control of her life because "my emotions were controlling me," she says.

She entered relationships that weren't healthy because she was afraid to be alone. She sometimes turned to alcohol to deaden her emotional pain, only to end up more depressed.

"I don't talk about this a lot because people automatically label people," she says.

"I've never seen myself as an alcoholic because people do things to survive. I view my drinking as a symptom."

Ogletree talked with different health care providers and counselors over the years, trying to get some insight into why she felt the way she did. At times, she took herself to mental health crisis units to deal with panic and paralyzing anxiety that stemmed



Photo: STACY GROPPER

through a huge plate glass window at a big, beautiful world, but I could never get through the glass to become part of that world."

Ogletree views her illness as a combination of heredity and life events.

"I don't want to say my father's death is what created my depression and anxiety," she says. "Mental illness is on both sides of my family. My

from fear of being abandoned by people in her life.

"I would start feeling better," she explains, "but then things would eventually go back."

new possibilities

Eventually, there came a point when Ogletree's illness immobilized her. In 2002, she and Roberts wanted to open a retail store selling Ogletree's work and other folk art, but she couldn't pull it together. She couldn't focus enough to set up the products for display. She recalls crying many times throughout the day because she felt so overwhelmed.

At the time, she didn't even recognize that she was having what she now calls "a major meltdown." One thing she did know: "I just couldn't continue feeling the way I was feeling. I was scared."

She made an appointment with her doctor. And though she'd sought help in the past, this time she felt she was truly being listened to.

"All the way there, I'd rehearsed what I was going to say to her. Then I made up my mind I wasn't going to cry. But when I got there, I just started babbling. I just fell apart. I was crying. I told her I'd been drinking alcohol to deal with the anxiety.

"She prescribed medications and told me, 'This is to replace the alcohol to help with your anxiety.' Then she booked me into an addiction services center in London, Ontario. At that point, my life changed."

Ogletree started seeing a counselor who helped her open up to new possibilities. Ogletree learned that along with medication, she needed to change her lifestyle—to work less and take better care of herself.

"It was a slow process," Ogletree recalls of her recovery from anxiety

and depression. "It was hell.

"I'd go in and talk to a woman I didn't know. I went through an hour of talking about stuff I'd never talked about before, and it was difficult. But as time went by I started feeling better."

'place for healing'

Ogletree says therapy helped her decide five years ago to marry Roberts, a man she had dated for more than 13 years.

"Once I started feeling confident about myself, I had to make changes, and the changes I made were about me and my role in our relationship. And once I felt like I got control of my life, emotions and direction, our relationship became much, much better. We both relaxed. We started trusting each other more."

Today, the couple live on a five-acre property named Winter Wheat, which Ogletree calls a "folk art environment." It contains paths that wander through pines and pass charming sculptures. In season, fragrant lilies, irises and hydrangeas bloom along the walkways. Visitors are served a courtesy cup of tea and can visit a store that sells Ogletree's creations and other home and garden decor.

"This place—and the art in it—has become an important place for healing," Ogletree says. "Being surrounded by nature, with a lot of birds and wild hydrangeas ... it's just a peaceful place."

It is here that Ogletree created a new painting that reflects her life now. This one shows a phoenix rising from a nest of flames toward a smiling sun that whispers the words, "resilience, serenity, recovery, hope." **e**

Michelle Roberts is a freelance writer based in St. Louis, Missouri. A recipient of a Rosalynn Carter Fellowship for Mental Health Journalism, she specializes in mental health and family issues.



REBIRTH "The Phoenix" shows Ogletree's healing after decades of emotional pain.

Lucy's tips

Ask for help. Ogletree says her path to recovery began when she turned to her physician. "This was the single most important decision that I had made to take control of my life," she says.

Open up. Talking to someone you trust, such as a friend, family member or counselor, can help you sort out your feelings. When matters get more serious, Ogletree says, a mental health professional "can help me come up with a good plan to stay mentally healthy."

Watch for warning signs. For Ogletree, crying easily, craving alcohol, trouble sleeping and isolating herself are signals that she's slipping into depression. "If any of these signs last more than a few days," she says, "I reach out to my support team."

Be kind to yourself. Ogletree treats herself to flowers, makes time to garden and paint, surrounds herself with positive people and has learned to say "no" so she doesn't overextend herself.