

# Ready, willing and disabled

*Peel Biog*

## The distinct art of being handicapped

MISSISSAUGA LIBRARY SYSTEM

By JOHN STEWART

Lorna Wreford is happiest about her art when it's anonymous.

It's not that her work lacks the stamp of her personality, or that she prefers paintings which don't say something.

It's just that when someone buys one of her works, and doesn't know who Lorna Wreford is, it's a reassurance that the Mississauga woman is being recognized for what she paints, and not for accomplishing so much . . . considering her handicap.

Wreford has spina bifida, a condition which means the spine does not grow together properly. When she was a nine-year-old, Wreford, who was aware she could be paralyzed if she was knocked in the wrong spot in the middle of her back, was wrestling with a boy at school.

She was hit in the back, and headed home straight away. By the time she made it home, she was crawling on her hands and knees. Every few days after that, the paralysis took away use of more and more of her lower body until she had no feeling below the waist.

When it was suggested to her that perhaps wrestling was not such a wise idea considering the condition she had, the artist states simply: "You can't live your life in a box." Subject closed.

Wreford is one of those people who seems to draw wells of strength from what other people perceive as an insurmountable problem.

In the last year, she says she seems to have acquired another handicap. Whenever someone asks her to prepare a show of her paintings, she can't say no.

Her current show at the Valhalla Inn in Etobicoke is her fifth in the last six months.

Wreford admits to a small amount of resentment since the reason she's been so busy obviously has something to do with the fact 1981 was The Year of the Disabled.

The native of West Toronto was one of only a dozen handicapped artists whose work was selected from hundreds of submissions to travel the province in a show entitled 12 Ontario artists.

Wreford, who recently celebrated her 44th birthday, has a difficult time resisting any exposure of her work. She has no shortage of things to do with the potential revenue each show can bring.

Her painting has already paid for three cars, and helps in the cost of sending her two adopted children, Martha, 12 and Andrew, 10, to private school. Then there are the skating and music lessons for which Wreford acts as chauffeur for her young charges.

Sometimes, painting has to wait while more immediately lucrative typing assignments take precedence. Wreford types essays and theses for university students, specializing in difficult papers involving equations, etc. Her own academic background in both science and English is a great help and she corrects spelling and grammar for students as well as providing editing suggestions.

There's been a lot of typing lately because of Kim Hak Won, the young Korean orphan the Wreford family is sponsoring through World Vision. The bright young student is off to high school now, so Wreford has embarked on a campaign among her friends for contributions to the annual cost of about \$2,500 to pay tuition, board, etc. For Wreford, that means trying to squeeze a little more typing and a little more painting into a schedule which already stretches credulity some days.

She does her drawing and painting at night when the household quiets down and her children are in bed. Almost all of her work reflects one of her first loves, biology.

She originally began studying the subject at McMaster University, even though her wheelchair meant she was late for virtually every lecture, especially in the winter. When a bad case of Asian flu hit, she had to quit.

That's when she took a secretarial course, and learned to type. It was during those days she also took some night courses in painting and got involved with the Lakeshore Art Club in Etobicoke.

One of the art courses she took at Western Tech was taught by Fred Wreford, her future husband, who is also an artist. He teaches art in an Oakville secondary school now.

When she went back to university, Wreford took English "because even if you're dead tired and sick, you can still read."

Her interest in art continued to blossom. Long drives in the country provided many of her subjects.

Almost all of Wreford's work involves glimpses of nature. "I try to see a world where I am," she explains. "It may be down at my feet, or around an old mail box or along a fence line."

Much of her work is deceptive in its simplicity "I try to get the aberrations," says the former research assistant at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. "I like to show a weathering process in nature. I see life as weathering."

Wreford works largely with "happy colors." She feels she's accomplished something special if, in a scene, "I can capture an experience someone else has missed."

When she's been more venturesome in her work, the reaction hasn't always been what was expected. One of her "strongest" pieces she feels, is a watercolor showing an old cemetery which has not been well tended. It's titled, "The Family of Yesteryear." Several places where it has been displayed, including most recently a bank, have asked the painting be removed. That indicates to the artist that at least the work is evoking a strong reaction, which she finds promising.

Asked whether there's a breaking point to the amount of life one can cram into waking hours, Wreford who confesses to a love of talking, says that so far she's found no limitations.

She's one of those handicapped overachievers who seem to make the world come to them, if they can't go to the world. Wreford, for instance, was most certainly the only paraplegic to receive an award from her high school girls' athletic association, (of which she was secretary).

"You know," she says casually, "you do the timing, some refereeing and generally run around organizing things and people appreciate it." She looks back on high school as "about the best time of my life."

Wreford works by making a line drawing her subject first, then adding watercolors.

The painting process requires her to sit on the floor, sometimes for several hours at a time. As she works, her legs swell. The longer she works, the bigger her legs get.

Wreford admits "it's a real slug to get over a handicap every day." One of the best ways is to adopt a project outside your regular activities and attack it with enthusiasm, advises the Mississauga woman.

"I have bundles of enthusiasm," she says brightly, "and for somebody who's handicapped that's really important."

Wreford's show at the Valhalla Inn near Highway 427 continues until April 1.



Mississauga artist Lorna Wreford, it has been a busy six months. She is completing her fifth show of paintings in that time. Overcoming a physical handicap wasn't easy, but the Credit Woodlands woman says she has "bundles of energy" for her art, her family, and her many other projects.

(Staff photo by Rob Beintema)