

# The South Roanoke Circle



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## Sunny's Sweet 16

**Palette Profiles: a series of articles profiling neighborhood artists**

by Lillian King Meidlinger  
photos by Mary Anne Marx

It took 16 moves for Sunny Rosso and her husband, Jack, to find us here in Roanoke. A year later, they seem to have truly settled in and found their respective niches in the community while simultaneously finding the time and energy to give back to it (a pretty quick turnaround by relocation standards!).

Sunny was born in Chicago but grew up in Westfield, New Jersey ("a great place to grow up," she notes). She loved art and was always fooling around with painting or drawing or some other arty thing but she graduated from high school knowing she wanted to be a nurse. Sunny attended Duke University for three semesters before getting married and having two children. A few years later when things hadn't quite worked out as anticipated, Sunny decided she wanted to go back to school to complete that nursing degree. She had enough money to last a year and went to the practical nursing school in Princeton at Princeton Hospital. "It was a fantastic program," says Sunny. In the meantime, when she least expected (or wanted) it, Sunny met Jack. They fell in love, were married, and established the Rosso family.

A few years later, Sunny decided she really wanted to get her R.N. but needed to be able to do it while working full time and raising her two kids. The University of the State of New York Regents College (now Excelsior College) had an external degree program which was the only one of its kind at the time. Sunny completed her R.N. through this groundbreaking (and somewhat grueling!) program.

Jack's work in communications took them through several homes in upstate New York, then on to California, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. In the early years, work and children did

not leave much time for art. However, a desire to give lots of Christmas gifts com-



combined with a lack of financial resources to purchase said gifts led Sunny to draw on both her artistic talents and a great eye for repurposing found items. "I think that's why I have this love of recycling because I was constantly on the lookout for things that I could turn into something else," she says. Sunny continues, "I would get very artsy fartsy from the end of

October until December 24." Because Sunny always preferred handmade gifts to store bought ones, she thought others might as well (though her creations did not always go over as well as she hoped!).

At some point in time, Sunny got into collage work. "I loved the idea that you could make something really great out of paper that would otherwise be thrown away," she says. "I remember the first time I saw a collage by Kurt Schwitters and I thought, this is just too good!" The practical side of collage was a big draw as it is a great way to use just about any material and it can vary in size from tiny to huge. The ideas behind collage were appealing to Sunny, too: its long history and how it was part of a rebellion against organized art for masters such as Matisse and Picasso. No matter what other media she may give a try, Sunny says, "I will always gravitate back

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to collage.”

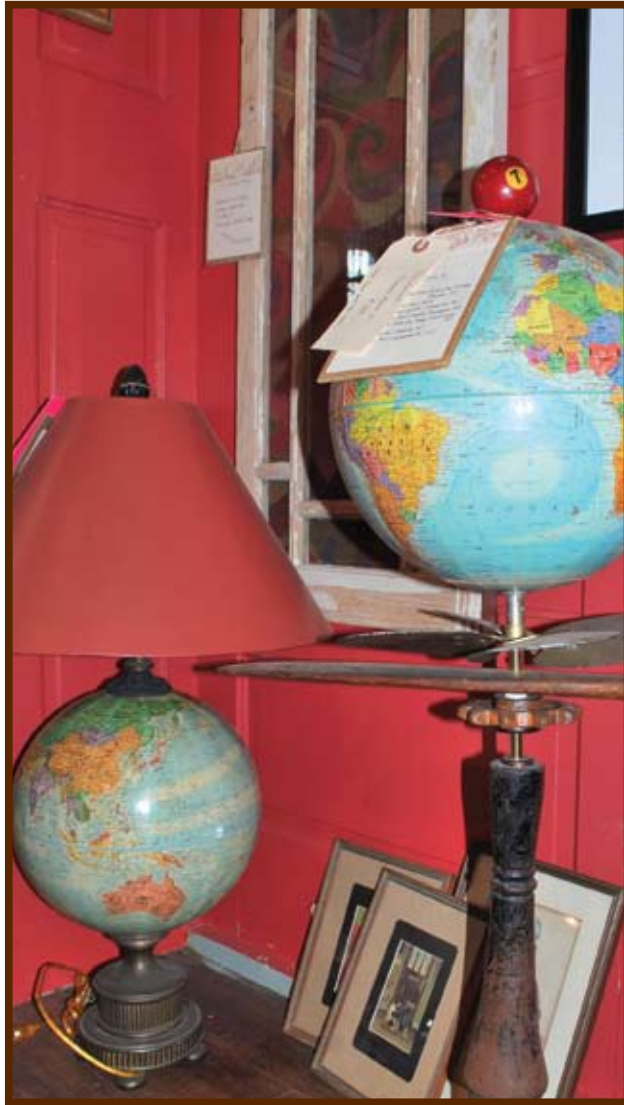
Sunny retired from nursing in 1994 when she and Jack were living in Nashville. Though she thought she might miss nursing (she hasn't!), Sunny was ready to get back into art. One of the things she first dug her hands into upon retirement was emulsion printing using Polaroid SX-70 cameras. She made cards using art photos taken during a 1976 trip to Europe. Also while in Nashville, Sunny took a great class in cement sculpture and dabbled in that medium for a while. Another fun experience Sunny had while living in Tennessee came grace of a friend who called one day asking if she would like to assist in teaching a watercolor class aboard the QE2. After hitting the local consignment shops for gowns to wear to the ship's semi-formal events, Sunny spent two weeks as a crew member on this legendary ship with almost all expenses paid (“I had the best time,” says she).

After Nashville, the Rossos lived in Hendersonville, North Carolina for a while. One of Sunny's favorite places there was Wickwire Gallery, an art shop that sold pieces from all over the country. She got to know the proprietors and “One day I got up the nerve to tell them I dabbled in mixed media art and did collage work.” They invited Sunny to bring in some of her work and then offered to sell all the items she brought them. They helped Sunny with pricing and titling her pieces and told her not to be discouraged if nothing sold for a while. Four or five days later, one of Sunny's pieces sold. Within a week, all four items were gone. Sunny recalls asking, “Does this mean I'm a professional artist now? I was just on a cloud!” The owner asked for more of her work and a lovely relationship ensued where Sunny would bring in five or six pieces a month. While living in Hendersonville, Sunny took a mixed media class at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine where she learned to make lamps. “The best thing was we were allowed to go into the dumps in that area...I was like a kid in a candy store...there were just miles of junk,” she recalls with glee.

After Hendersonville, Sunny and Jack moved to Pennsylvania. The locale was not a good artistic, social, spiritual, or emotional match for Sunny and she was faced with a long artistic dry spell. When the long-time friend who first introduced Sunny and Jack called and suggested they take a look at Roanoke as a potential home, they packed their bags for a visit. With so many moves under their belts, the couple could go through a house in 10 minutes and know whether or not it was right for them. After her less-than-pleasant experience in Pennsylvania, Sunny also had compiled a “top ten” list of things she was looking for in a hometown. The highlights include a strong arts community, access to water that was fishable, and a neighborhood to live in that had lots of children, sidewalks, and places you could reach by foot. “The more we looked the more we realized there was so much in Roanoke,” says Sunny. They particularly loved South Roanoke and while looking at a house on Jefferson

Street, Sunny saw parents pushing strollers and people walking their dogs and thought, “this is my street, I just love this street.” And in fact they did end up buying a house on Jefferson Street which they moved into one year ago this month.

After the move to Roanoke, Sunny started making art almost immediately. “It's been extremely productive...I'm just so at peace here,” she notes. One of the draws to Roanoke for Sunny was Black Dog Salvage, it is simply her kind of place. She connected with the staff there right away and they asked her what she was doing with the bits and pieces she was purchasing. When Sunny told them about her lamps, collages, and assemblages, they asked to see pictures of her work and subsequently asked her to bring some of it in. Koiner Thomas, who is in sales and merchandising at Black Dog, told her “You have to sell your stuff here, we're a perfect marriage!” and Sunny thought, “How great is this I'm now selling stuff in the place I love to go most!” At first, Sunny's pieces were put here and there throughout the warehouse but after a while Koiner encouraged Sunny to get her own booth. She did so and aptly named it “Lost and Found Again.” Upon further encouragement, she has since moved to a more prominent space there. Lost and Found Again marks the first time Sunny has had her own retail space and it has been very exciting. Sunny loves the partnership with Black Dog Salvage and sees the staff there as “extended family.”



One of the prominent items on Sunny's aforementioned wish list was to find a place to do volunteer work. When a friend took Jack to the CHIP (Child Health Investment Partnership) offices to see if he could help with a communications issue, he returned to tell Sunny that he had found the place for her to do her good deeds. Sunny then took an extensive tour of CHIP where “everyone I met was even more energized than the last person I met!” By the end of the tour, she found herself wiggling with anticipation. The folks at CHIP found a perfect match for Sunny and her art background: they asked her to make educational toys that the CHIP personnel could take with them to give to the kids during home visits. Now Sunny has a small brigade of helpers that comes to her house once a week to make learning toys using a bevy of recycled goods. Among the items they create are memory games made from small bits of fabric attached to cardboard squares, flash cards made from brightly colored paint chips, and lace-up cards used for motor skill development. Sunny loves working for CHIP and strongly supports the partnership mentality of the place. She was excited to find it so easy to volunteer at a place that matched her interests and skills so well.

*Lillian King Meidlinger has lived and played in South Roanoke for seven years (a newcomer by neighborhood standards). She writes for fun and profit when the small people holding her hostage allow it.*



### Becky Locke came home to Brandon Oaks.

As a girl, Becky Locke lived next door to the property that would become Brandon Oaks. So in 1993, when she and her husband were looking for a place to retire, they looked at the thriving senior community adjacent to her old homestead. “I really felt like I was coming home.” Although they didn't choose Brandon Oaks just for the familiarity. With a health and wellness center, convenience to health care and a community of active people, Brandon Oaks has everything a person needs to feel at home.

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