

TAKING ROOT AGAIN

Mississippi artist who fled Katrina rebuilds connections to home state

By **KATHLEEN DAMINGER**
Staff Writer

Artist Roberta Little has planted her roots in Lancaster, but her branches reach all the way to the Gulf Coast.

She'll be bringing a slice of Mississippi flavor to town this weekend as her organization, Shoo Fly Moon Pie, sponsors its first visit by a Gulf Coast artist. Sculptor Bill Myer will be showing his works at Red Raven Art Company, (along with works by Matt Chambers and Matthew Jones), and he will be artist-in-residence at the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center.

The visit is a dream come true for Little.

A Katrina survivor who relocated to Lancaster city, Little has found the flourishing art community here to be both welcoming and nurturing. But her heart is still tied to the home and friends she left in Gautier, Mississippi.

It was a small home, but cozy and comfortable for her and Howard, her husband of nearly 40 years. It was to be their retirement haven. Then Katrina hit.

"It was hard to get your mind to wrap around it," says Little. "It's still hard for me. We always had to leave the area because we were in a flood zone. Evacuation was what we did. It

was part of living there."

But during prior evacuations, the couple had always returned home. This time, although still standing, their house — at 17 feet above sea level during surges over 21 feet — was not the same home they had left. The waves had dragged away pieces of their lives and replaced them with gooey sediment, sand and mud.

Among the items destroyed were all the art that Little had moved to the first-floor bathtub before evacuating, thinking it would be safe there. Ironically, much of her art had been on exhibit at the local art associ-



"Retribution" by Bill Myers.

ation, a 100-year-old building Little thought stood little chance of withstanding the storm. It was left unscathed. Although profoundly effected by the devastating hurricane and the changes it made on her life, Little is not one to dwell on the negative.

She and her husband took refuge with their daughter and son-in-law in Chester County, then stayed temporarily in a property in Kennett Square the couple had recently bought for a business.

They decided not to rebuild. "I just decided I didn't ever want to put myself through that again," she says. "Every time a storm comes you start watching and waiting. So we made the decision (to leave)."

Along the way, people came to her aid. There were family, friends and even strangers who chipped in to support the couple as they worked through the life-

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Exhibit of works by Bill Myers, Matt Chambers and Matthew Jones

Myers welcome to Lancaster followed by opening reception

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Roberta Little with her work, "A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words," at the Red Raven Art Company.

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changing events of Katrina.

"You can't imagine the gift," she says. "All you can do is think of ways to pay in forward."

It was, she says, a "matter of tossing the dice" that led them to Lancaster.

Her first day here, while waiting to meet a Realtor to look for housing, Little sat outside Central Market to wait for her husband to bring her a snack.

Noticing the man beside

her was covered in "mud," she assumed he was an artist and struck up a conversation. Turns out the first Lancastrian she met was potter Kevin Lehman, who along with a friend encouraged the couple to settle in Lancaster city.

"I love it here," she says. "I'm so thrilled and grateful that we are here. It couldn't be a better place to be."

Her gratitude has poured out on the community in the form of "Shoe Fly Moon Pie," an organization she founded last year dedicated to cultivating cultural connections between the artists

of Lancaster County and those in Mississippi.

The goal is to bring Mississippi artists to Lancaster and vice versa. While there each artist (or in the future groups of artists) will tour the area, teach and make some kind of positive impact on the local community.

Little knew immediately who her first candidate would be. Fellow artist and Katrina survivor Bill Myers, a Mississippian born and bred, is a gregarious people person who Little describes as the "funniest, most delightful character."

During his three weeks in

town, he'll be showing his "tremendously intricate sculpture pieces" at the exhibit opening at Red Raven Art Company and teaching informal "Snack and Sketch" drawing workshops at Little's home. (Cost is \$20. Call 391-6219 for details.)

But his impact will reach beyond the gallery walls. Myers will be bringing the gift of art, the voice of art, to the youth at Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center. The contacts to arrange that visit spawned the formation of a daughter organization — The ArtSmart project, which will keep the LCYIC staffed with

visiting local artists after Myers' visit.

"So many times in life you feel you don't have any control over things, you feel helpless," says Little. "But when you create something whether in writing, in music or with a paintbrush, it's yours. Nobody can take that from you. You don't need a finished product to remind you what that experience was like.

"It's so unique to you, it's like giving birth."