

Portrait of an Artist

The cost of arthritis drugs pushed a painter to pursue a second career.

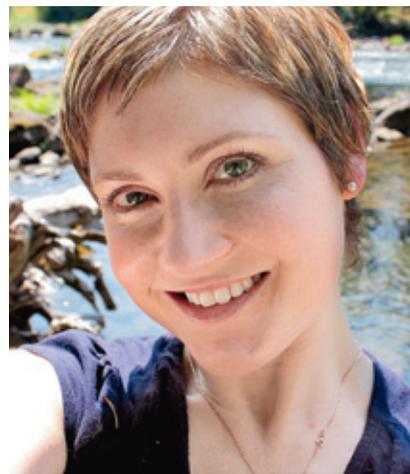
IN ARTIST KATHLEEN POWERS' DRAWINGS AND PAINTINGS, she often portrays herself as a bird on the ground – vulnerable, yet “always with optimism that it could fly away,” Kathleen says.

In real life, the 42-year-old artist wishes she could “fly away” from rheumatoid arthritis (RA), which she has had since her junior year in college at the Kansas City Art Institute. But unlike the birds in her artwork, Kathleen seems to soar above her challenges.

Arts degree in photography and then work as a commercial photographer. However, she wouldn't feel major relief from her symptoms until the late '90s, when biologics became available.

Knowing she couldn't afford them long-term, she decided to switch careers. Outside the arts, she stood a better chance at having good, employer-provided health insurance.

“I sat down with a friend who is a nurse, and she identified fields that



The answer: a career running lab tests as a medical technologist.

She enrolled in a medical technology program at Portland Community College, confronting the very classes that she had previously avoided – math, science and chemistry – at 36 years old.

“The head of the program said to me, ‘I've never had anybody with an MFA before. Are you sure this is what you want to do?’ I said, ‘I appreciate your concern. However, I will show you I can do this,’” Kathleen says.

With help from tutors and friends, Kathleen graduated second in her class. She is now a medical technologist at Legacy Emanuel Hospital in Portland three days a week, the minimum she must work to qualify for benefits.

The other four days she focuses on her art – which isn't always about RA and her struggles with it. Recently, she designed a set for a local college's Shakespeare production.

“I don't want it to be about me. I want [the focus] to be about what I make,” Kathleen says.

– AMY BONESTEEL



The bird in “The Blue Sleep” (2008, gouache on paper) is trying “to hide for a while... to disappear and rest without worry, scrutiny or consequence,” Kathleen writes on her website. See more of her artwork at www.kathleenpowers.com.

Back in 1989, when she was diagnosed, treatments for RA included corticosteroids and anti-malarial drugs. They helped her feel just well enough to finish college, get a Master of Fine

would work with my personality,” says Kathleen, who lives with her husband in the countryside near Portland, Ore. “I am extremely detail-oriented, and I find comfort in repetition.”

 Read more inspiring stories of people with arthritis at www.ArthritisToday.org/community.