



Artist brings a touch of humanity to the ICU

Nancy Robb

In the early 1980s, Vancouver-born artist and poet Heather Spears realized she couldn't draw babies properly and began visiting a nearby neonatal unit. It was the start of a passion that has lasted nearly 20 years.

Then living on a small island in Denmark and specializing in portraiture, she became fascinated with premature infants and bicycled regularly to a hospital in Copenhagen. She sat in a corner and quickly executed pencil-and-chalk line drawings of these tiny beings as they struggled to survive.

"Premature babies have never been drawn before," Spears says. "In the time of the Masters, when they were studying human subjects these babies weren't around. Their movements are different, their shape is different — everything about them is different — so you can't use your knowledge of the human anatomy that you learned at school."

Spears, who studied art in Vancouver and London, England, included some of those early drawings in an exhibit held in May at Dalhousie University medical school. Last spring, she became the school's fourth artist-in-residence since the program was introduced in the early 1990s.

Her exhibit, *Drawings of Newborns and Children in Crisis*, presented a selection of Spears' work to the present day. Soon after she began drawing newborns, she started drawing critically ill children in neonatal units and pediatric wards not only in Denmark but also in Sweden, England, North America and the Middle East.

Her drawings showed emaciated stillborns, beautiful newborns and obviously weak infants in incubators, tubes protruding from their bodies. Others showed a father dressing his stillborn son and a doctor performing procedures on an infant. There were also drawings of older children with life-threatening illnesses and of a girl who had just donated bone marrow to her brother.

"It's because it's so difficult and so private that it intensifies my attention," Spears says of the subject matter. "It's very transient. I feel if I don't witness to this child now, I'm not going to get another chance."

Spears has also drawn athletes, women during childbirth and dancers, musicians and poets in performance. "Anything people do with all their heart, they become very beautiful," she says. "Certainly these children are fighting with all their heart."

Dr. Jock Murray, professor of medical humanities at Dalhousie, says Spears was selected for the artist-in-residence post because "we thought her art would bring to life sensitivity about these tiny infants and their first experience of life."

Murray says the artist-in-residence program is designed to encourage medical students to broaden their views of pa-



Heather Spears

"Baby on back" is one of Heather Spears' many sketches of newborns

tient care. "It is very easy, in fact it's traditional, for medical students to learn medicine through the eyes of basic science and the eyes of traditional medicine. We try to encourage the students to see . . . that this is a person, and the person has relationships, the person has a life, a community. That's also important and it's important in the health care of a person. If medical students don't notice those aspects, they're going to be very poor physicians."

Murray says Spears' drawings reveal the humanity of her subjects. "If one entered an ICU, one might see an infant in terms of electrolyte balance, chest x-ray results, breathing difficulties, that kind of thing," he says. "Those are all very important and medical students have to be expert at that, but they also have to see the humanity of that infant."

Spears says people who have had a seriously ill child understand her work best. "Certainly the parents love the drawings because they are much more personal and gentle than a photograph," she says.

She prefers not to draw posed portraits. "I really don't like it if the parent begins to arrange the baby or the nurse turns the baby — the first glimpse is the one I want."

Spears, who has won several awards for poetry, published a book of her drawings and poems on critically ill infants in 1986. While at Dalhousie, she completed about 50 drawings of infants and older children at the IWK-Grace Health Centre in Halifax.

At the end of June she returned to Denmark, where she will continue drawing children at the hospital in Copenhagen. "Sometimes I go in every single night. I go all over the pediatric wards. Some people think I'm on staff there."

Nancy Robb is a Halifax journalist.