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Faith leads Brookfield woman to recreate Michelangelo masterpiece

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spiritual piece that comes right from the heart of the painter."

Nakano said oil painting has always been her passion. But she stopped painting for a long time to raise her family. "There was never enough time," said Nakano. "Homework rules our lives and my husband and I were running ragged."

About seven years ago, she took up the hobby again.

Nakano had no formal art training when she was young, but as an adult she has studied with Frank Cronin, a Vermont artist and art teacher who runs workshops nationwide. Nakano would go to Milford for lessons. "He taught me how to paint as the old masters did in the Renaissance period," Nakano said.

She said she chose to do a version of the Pietà because she saw it as a "a sensitive subject" and because her teacher had done something similar.

Choosing a topic was one thing. Completing the painting, which measures 36 inches by 50 inches, was quite another. There were still kids to attend to. And housework. And a part-time job selling televisions at the mall.

"I used photographs and friends as models in the beginning and then had to work on it either at out-of-town (art) classes or between chores at home," said Nakano. "I remember I'd put it in different areas at home every day so I would keep passing it and working on it."

Faith kept Nakano on track through the last three busy years. She believed she could create a painting that would "touch everyone."

"I felt no other representation could possibly emulate more emotion than the Mother Mary holding the crucified body of her only beloved son, Christ, our savior," Nakano said.

She got her first positive feedback when she displayed a charcoal drawing of the work at St. Joseph's Church in Brookfield, the family church. "I knew the emotional impact was strong after receiving a letter from the priest telling me how people were praying and meditating in front of it," Nakano said.

She also received encouragement from her two older children — Robert, now 15, and Nicolette, 12. She also has a son, Colton, 3. "My mother was very devoted," said Nicolette. "She didn't get a lot of chances to paint because she had to keep watching us, but she loved to paint and I was very interested to follow her work. I think her painting is very cool."

Nakano's husband, Robert, a special investigator for the state of Connecticut, admires his wife's dedication. "It's been tough for her because of the family and we've appreciated all the time it's taken her. She's always believed in this painting and in its message."

Nakano finally finished the painting in January.

She hopes to use the work as a launching pad to become a full-time artist. She's creating a studio above a new garage that the family is building. She plans to start selling prints of her Pietà.

"Now I see the beginning of something I've always wanted to do. I'm jumping right into it and promoting myself," Nakano said. "Now that the children are growing up, maybe I can find more time for my art."

But today, the painting represents more than a career move. On Easter, it represents a deep expression of Nakano's faith.

"It reminds us that because Christ made this ultimate sacrifice, mankind should be forgiving toward one another in order to live in peace."

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Stores

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going to follow the Lord or are they going to go the way of the world?"

Michelle McKenzie, owner of The Littlest Angel, a shop in Bethel, said current events have prompted some of her customers to follow the Lord and buy items from her shop as a way of expressing their faith. Relatives of soldiers sent overseas, for example, have come in to buy coins featuring St. George, the patron saint of the military.

Brookfield resident Ruth Schrieber, who was in The Littlest Angel Friday to buy rosary beads for her grandson, said events have led her to be more religious.

"I think the situation in the world, the way it is, has gotten me to start thinking about my own spirituality," Schrieber said.

McKenzie, who bought the shop two months ago, said the store used to sell only angel-themed items, but the previous owners "found little by little people were coming in for the more religious stuff."

There are plenty of different ways to get closer to Jesus through purchases.

Mercy and Truth, which has been open 1½ years, features religious books and music, but also sells religious toys, games, jewelry, coffee mugs, picture frames, pens and knickknacks.

"Everything in our store is designed to point people toward God and his son," MacLean said.

Some of the items, like a handheld digital version of the King James Bible, help bring religion to the 21st century. Others, like "Bible Man" games, puzzles and movies, which feature a high-tech, armor-clad man who "fights his enemies using the word of God, which the Bible says is a sword," try to make religion fun for children, MacLean said.

Bryan Kellner, manager of Mercy and Truth, said that while books, especially the Bible, are the store's best seller, Christian music has been gaining popularity.

Two musical groups, Mercy Me and Switchfoot, are bringing religious music to the mainstream. Caroline Ford, manager at FYE, a music and video store in the Danbury Fair mall, said music labels are signing more Christian rock groups.

"They're always looking for the next Nirvana," Ford said. "It's similar in the Christian music situation."

Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" may also be enticing shoppers to buy religiously. Tony Rocca, who works at Morning Star Christian Book & Music Store in Danbury, gave Passion" the credit for hot sales.

"The Bibles have been selling off the shelves" since the movie came out, Rocca said. "The Bibles are definitely (selling) because of the movie. Definitely."

Not all retailers are convinced that religion is playing more of a role in consumers' buying decisions.

At Candlewood Video in New Fairfield, owner Karen Parisseau said she hasn't seen any increase in religious movie rentals since "Passion" came out. "It's not like people became religious all the sudden," she said.

But Tom Spegnola, who owns Haystown Video in Danbury, noticed an increase in rentals of religious-themed movies.

"Since 'The Passion' came out 'The Last Temptation Of Nazareth' rented half a dozen times, and believe me, it would have sat there untouched otherwise," he said.

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