



Artist treasures family

William Grabowski's 'Legacy' series springs from genealogical memorabilia

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Artistic talent isn't something that runs in William Grabowski's family, but for the Huntington Station teacher, family has been a wellspring of inspiration.

When his widowed mother died in 2000, Grabowski had to deal with going through her belongings, including boxes of family photos that dated back to her childhood. "I looked at the photos and just found them beautiful and arresting," Grabowski, 60, says. "Some people I knew, some I didn't. But I thought these are some pretty neat photos, and I wanted to bring them back to life."

So Grabowski learned how to use Photoshop, a computer-editing program for pictures, to enhance those family snapshots — some of which were torn and yellowed with age. At the same time, he uncovered other family treasures in those boxes, from his mother's well-traveled suitcase to the violin that belonged to his father, who died in 1992.

"I thought maybe I could combine family memorabilia that would be . . . discarded and combine it with the restored photos and reinvent the lives of the people in my family to celebrate their history and heritage," says Grabowski, an elementary school art teacher in the Herricks School District for 35 years.

The result is a collection of 35 pieces in a series called "Legacy" that pays tribute to multiple generations in his family. The mixed-media artworks are on view at the Center for Photographic Art in Huntington through Feb. 28.

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William Grabowski, right, used a door from his parents' home to frame an enlarged photo of his father, center, and his grandparents. He calls this selection in his "Legacy" series "Welcome Home." ■ [More photos, video at newsday.com/act2](http://newsday.com/act2)

See LEGACY on G22

Legacies enhanced



WILLIAM GRABOWSKI

In "Nora Remembers," Grabowski combined his father's violin with images of an Irish acquaintance with a lilting voice.

LEGACY from G21

Among the pieces are "The Sojourner," a model boat with a photoshopped picture of an uncle on one of its sails, and "Portrait of Anna," a salute to his seamstress grandmother that includes photos of her on the spokes of a wagon wheel that rests atop the base of an antique Singer sewing machine.

"Portal Vision," uses his mother's suitcase as a framework to honor the memory of his Uncle George, who died at age 8 from pneumonia after contracting tonsillitis. He scanned the photo and used an acetate process to turn the photo into a decal. After applying it to glass, he displayed it inside the suitcase, giving it a sort of 3-D effect. "A lot of people have seen this piece," he says. "More people might have seen George since I've done this piece than maybe saw him when he was alive."

Creating these works has inspired Grabowski to learn more about his family's roots. He's searched his family records at Ellis Island's website (libertyellisfoundation.org), and a visit to the island inspired a piece made from Grabowski's childhood building blocks with his vision of the immigrant experience.

Often, Grabowski comes up with his idea and then digs into the research. Checking the records at Ellis Island, he learned that his grandfather came from Poland in 1909. And he now has a picture of the ship that brought his grandfather to this country. "The records even showed that he was a miller," Grabowski says.

Off to an early start

Grabowski's artistic talent first surfaced when he was 8. Off from school because he



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Grabowski's "Sojourner" is a tribute to John Kaleta, an uncle, whose picture is photoshopped onto one of the sails of the model boat.



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In "Family Reunion," Grabowski added a photo of his Uncle Leonard Sienkiewicz, who served in the Korean War, inset right, to a tray from the era.

was sick, he decided to entertain himself by drawing a picture of a bird. His parents gushed over his work. Surprised at their reaction, he showed it to his teacher, who commented, "Billy, this is good. You should keep doing this."

Their positive reaction sparked a lifelong interest, he says. "I thought I must have some ability if people are making a big deal about this."

From there, art became a major study, and he earned an associate's degree from Nassau Community College and a bachelor's degree from Stony Brook University. He also has a master's in education from Hofstra University and a second master's in instructional technology from LIU Post.

One of his other passions has been acting, and he's performed on local stages including Broad-Hollow Theatre Company and the Township Theatre Group at Five Towns College in Dix Hills. It was at Township where he became friendly with Sue Anne Dennehy, sister-in-law of actor Brian Dennehy. She, like Grabowski, was an art teacher at the time, and they bonded imme-



For "Portal Vision," Grabowski used his mother's suitcase as a 3-D frame for mementos of his Uncle George, who died at age 8.

William Grabowski's 'Legacy' series

WHEN | WHERE 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays through Feb. 28, Center for Photographic Art, 22 Clinton Ave., Huntington **INFO** Free; 631-760-1257. Grabowski's "Legacy" series and his other works can also be viewed at williamgrabowski.com

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Dennehy, of Huntington Station, became familiar with Grabowski's art and purchased one of his collages for her home. When her brother was turning 70 in 2008, she wanted to get him something special to mark the occasion, so she asked Grabowski if he could create a piece using photos from Dennehy's career, including scenes from his Broadway turn as Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman."

"Brian was absolutely thrilled by the present," said Dennehy, who now works full-time as an actress. "He had never seen anything like it."

Grabowski has since been commissioned to make about a dozen similar pieces for clients who usually pay "a few hundred dollars" for them, he says.

His photos and mixed-media works have been shown in numerous venues including the New-York Historical Society. Grabowski also designed theatrical props for choreographer Jacques d'Amboise's

productions for the National Dance Institute and his art have been featured in more than 200 shows.

Appreciating the legacy

Still, his "Legacy" series has been a special project, not only for helping Grabowski learn about his roots but for teaching his daughters, Alexandra, 19, and Holly, 16, about their family.

"Even though we didn't know any of these people, it's cool to have that around the house," Holly says. She and her sister "ask each [other], who looks more like this relative or that relative?"

Alexandra says, "It's made us want to learn about our mom's side."

Grabowski has even started doing works inspired by his children. One of the photos hanging in his hallway shows side-by-side images of his daughter Alexandra on her first day of kindergarten next to her last day in high school.

"At first, I was kind of like, 'What are you doing?'" says Alexandra, "but now that I look back on my life, I really appreciate the fact that I have a dad who can do that kind of stuff. I think it's awesome. My friends think it's really awesome."

Grabowski realized the loss of his mother helps inspire him to create a loving tribute to his family. "It went from being a sad chore to a rejuvenation and regeneration of my creative mind," Grabowski says. "It was my way of saying thank you for what they did — coming over here, starting a new life, creating a family and working hard."