

Charting a New Direction | Deborah Stull-Kinsley

They say the only thing constant in life is change, and over the course of her life, Deborah (Deb) Stull-Kinsley has amassed her share of changes. Today, she enjoys painting in her studio located in her home in northern Wisconsin. With a beautiful lakeview in the front yard and the Fox Creek wildlife refuge running through the woods behind their house, she and her husband, Paul, are surrounded daily by the sights and sounds of nature.

Childhood years

Born at Camp Roberts, California, Deb's family story relates that, at the time, her dad was stationed with the Army and preparing to ship out with his unit to the Korean conflict. However, her mom went into labor and a sympathetic sergeant signed a leave pass for her dad to stay in camp for the birth. By the time Deb was born, the conflict was winding down and her dad never did have to go into combat. After his discharge, her parents returned to their home state of Iowa where her dad completed his mechanical engineer degree at Iowa State University in Ames. Her dad then accepted a job at 3M Company in Minnesota, and the Stull family including Deb's younger sister, Susan, moved to St. Paul.



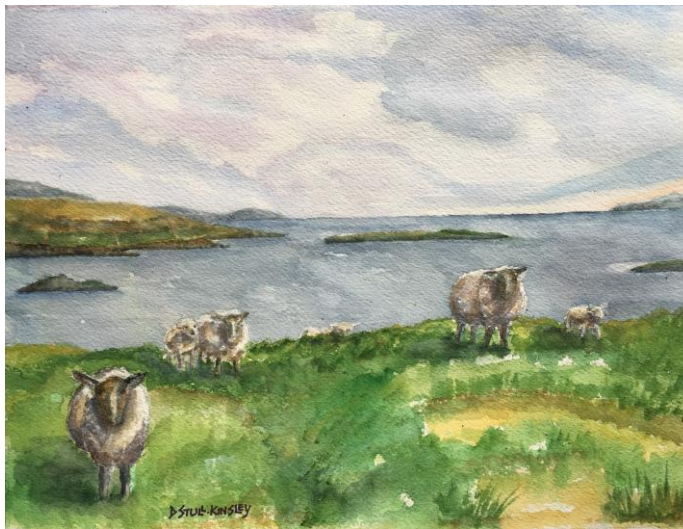
Her early childhood was spent in East St. Paul, and Deb remembers summer days filled with drawing chalk towns on their quiet street, playing with friends, and going on family camping trips. Each summer, she and her sister traveled on the Rock Island Line train to Mason City, Iowa, where they spent a month with their grandparents: two weeks in Hampton with her mom's family, hiking through the woods with Grandma Ellen and helping Grandpa Vernon at his dry-cleaning shop; and two weeks at Steamboat Rock on her dad's family farm, learning self-sufficiency skills – gardening, cooking and canning – with her Grandma Polly, and taking care of the livestock, putting up hay and harvesting with Grandpa Ed. These were pivotal memory-making times and kindled a deep affinity for working hard, living on a farm and being outdoors.

Planting the seeds of art

From an early age, Deb's mom encouraged her interest in art, and at age 9, she signed her up for a summer session of art classes with a neighbor artist, Rita Hendricks. These weekly classes equipped Deb with a basic understanding of color and a love of drawing and painting with pastels. In junior high, the family moved to Stillwater, and although Deb took art classes in high school and college, she became increasingly frustrated with the teaching methods of the time. "It was the early 1970's, and art instructors would just tell you to 'paint what you feel.' This was very discouraging, and I felt that I didn't have the ability or skills to move forward in my art," said Deb.

With a love of history, she enrolled in Concordia College in Moorhead, MN, and finished her general courses as well as all the history classes she could fit into her schedule. After two years and with no clear direction for declaring a major, she returned home, took on seasonal work at a local apple orchard during the fall and a ski resort over the winter, finished a legal secretary degree through

Globe Business College, and got married in the spring. She moved to her husband's family farm in rural North Dakota.



Free Grazing
9" x 12" Watercolor

Although she had always wanted to live on a farm, her prior knowledge of farming came from the 250-acre farm her grandparents owned in Iowa. It was a totally different experience being part of a family-owned operation raising cattle and crops on 1,800 acres in the Red River Valley. However, even with the raising of three wonderful children, helping on the farm, and taking care of a bevy of animals including a llama, goats, and a small flock of black sheep, Deb's creativity continued to blossom.

An avid gardener, she completed the ND Extension Master Gardener Program, and when available in the community, she took classes in pottery,

stained glass, and acrylic painting. In 1986, she ventured to Washington Island, WI, and participated in a week-long course on loom weaving at Siever's School of Fiber Arts. She brought back a newly milled, ready-to-assemble, 4-harness floor loom in her car and soon became an active member of the regional fiber guild in ND. Color has always had a profound impact on Deb, and she still finds the entire process of selecting the yarn, arranging the colors, warping the loom and weaving the fabric challenging, yet incredibly satisfying.

After four years of daily commuting a 120-mile roundtrip from their farmstead in Park River to Grand Forks, Deb graduated from the University of North Dakota in 1990 with a bachelor's degree in Communications/Public Relations, a minor in History and a concentration in Graphic Design. From 1990-98, she served as the Community Relations director for two rural healthcare facilities.

In 1998, Deb and her children returned to Minnesota to a home near her parents on the St. Croix River. "The natural scenery of this wild river area makes the Marine on St. Croix community a haven for artists," said Deb. "It was a tremendous gift for us to be close to a supportive family and to experience the energy and creativity of this special place."

A dedicated lifelong learner, Deb continued to learn new things and expand her perceptions. She joined the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in 2001 and worked as a communications professional in the Office of Human Resources for 12 years. In addition to working full-time, in 2007, she gained her master's degree in Strategic Communications from the U of M School of Journalism and Mass Communications. From 2012-2017, she served as an editor/writer on the corporate communications team at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation in Center City, MN.

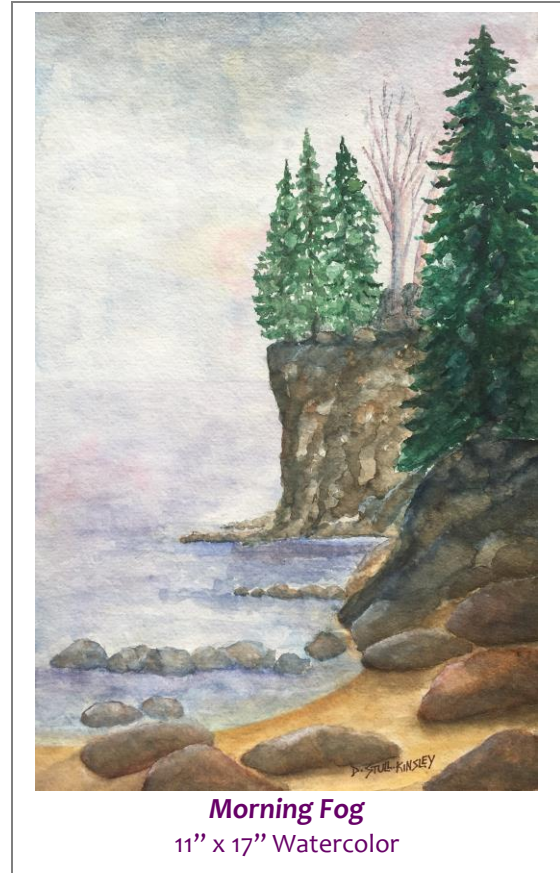
Pursuing Art

A few years ago, Deb discovered the joy of watercolor painting through a course led by artist Spencer Meagher at the Art Colony in Grand Marais, MN. And true to her life philosophy, she

continues to hone her skills. She recently participated in two classes led by watercolorist Paul Oman of Amery, WI – one on painting birch trees and the other on in-depth drawing techniques focused on perspective and figure drawing. She continues to be surprised by the transparency of watercolors and the marvelous fusing and interacting of colors.

In 2008, she married Paul Kinsley, and three years ago, they made a life decision to take on the renovation of a neglected lake cabin. After three years, the seemingly endless “to-do list” of projects is completed, and they are enjoying life in their new place. The unexpected death of Deb’s dad in early 2014 left an indelible mark on the entire family and propelled her to examine her own life. She chose to chart a new direction – one that moved away from the demands of the corporate world to a place where she could nurture her art passion and have the flexibility to provide care as needed for her mom.

Today, Deb enjoys working full-time on her art and is inspired by the landscapes around her, especially water, trees, rocks and sky. For her, there is something immensely healing about being outdoors – to have time to experience the silence and solitude, to be part of God’s wondrous handiwork, and to give thanks. She’s also had opportunities to travel and visit friends in Holland and Ireland, and the incredible landscapes found in those regions are often reflected in her paintings.



Deborah Stull-Kinsley is a member of Earth Arts of the Upper St. Croix Valley and maintains a blog about her art and life in northern Wisconsin at wildriverarts.blogspot.com.