

gail roberts

creating joy through art

By Aleza Freeman

Several times a week, women gather in artist, Gail Roberts', Tucson studio to assist in making her mosaic vision blossom. Roberts leads the women in glazing tiles, each handmade from clay, for her vibrant, 3-D plaques, display pieces, and wall murals. Good conversation and great company, says Roberts, leads to "an enormous exchange of ideas and transformation." Even her mother, visiting from Michigan, helped create tiles.

"With all of the love and great energy in the studio, my mother just lights up," Roberts says. "If this kind of experience can have such an effect on people, there should be more of these experiences."

As a youngster, Roberts got negative messages about art from her mom and dad, mostly because her New York uncle struggled financially to make his living as an artist. They had a change of heart, however, once she made it her career; her father, who has since passed away, even helped build her studio.

Art wasn't Roberts' first career. She began as a dental hygienist, a lucrative if not a soul-stirring job. Soon after becoming a hygienist, a pottery class influenced her to pursue art on the side. After 10 years in the dental office as well as increasing productivity as an artist, Roberts, who meanwhile relocated from Michigan to Tucson with her husband, decided to jump into the art world with both feet: she got her degree in art. "I could never sit still as an artist without growing constantly," she says. In art school, "The world opened up to me."

A professional studio potter, painter, teacher, director of an art studio, and a public artist, Roberts says her cur-

rent artwork represents a synthesis of almost 30 years of artistic exploration. "I've added a lot of tools to my toolbox," she says with a smile. "I understand all the different aspects of art, and can bring that to the table."

The mother of two, ages 14 and 18, and a member of Congregation Or Chadash, Roberts has had plenty of opportunities to utilize the tools in her "toolbox." She spearheaded an art education program at the Tucson Jewish Community Center and formed the Perlman Arts and Ceramics Studio there. In addition, she's created clay-based wall murals for public schools as well as businesses and residences. Her work has appeared in galleries throughout Arizona and California and her paintings are currently showcased at the Chop restaurant in Tucson.

Right now, she's creating ceramic and tile wall murals for four different sites within the Brandi Fenton Memorial Park, which is being established in Tucson in honor of Fenton, a young girl who died tragically in 2003. One of the pieces that measures 8-foot by 15-foot, is made up of 10,000 handmade tiles. It will pay tribute to organ donors, like Fenton. Butterflies, decorated in her studio by a bar mitzvah class, will be embedded in a concrete walkway.

As for working in clay, Roberts says she is "passionately in love" with the stuff. "You just completely lose yourself in the moment. Time ceases." She also admits she has a fantasy that someday she'll create an entire tile and mosaic environment inside a Las Vegas casino. Overall, she says, her dream is to create beauty. "There's so much darkness in the world, and it brings me sadness. I feel a strong pull to create joy through art. It's my life purpose." ■

