

## A follower of scientific art

By Rudi Whitmore

*Karen Wenburg finds creative freedom where she can in her job at Office Max. Sometimes, it takes a while, though.*

Karen Wenburg is a cheerful, 23-year old, mildly shy employee at Office Max, helping a customer check out.

She has a secret. A deep, dark one. She is not a native of Youngstown, and moved away after she graduated from Youngstown State University to New York, her childhood home... and chose to come back.

“My friends are here, you know? My boyfriend has a job here, my friends are close again, and I just had to transfer to a different store.” She sighs. “I hate working checkout. Office Max.” She lets out a funny, evil little cackle. A cross between Butthead and a cartoon villain. “Retail... it's not really my thing.”



In fact, she continues, the only part she truly enjoys is working in the back. “In print and document services, there's a bit of creative freedom... Leeway to do your own thing. A lot of customers have businesses or are putting on events. The customers need ways to promote and a lot of them aren't sure how. Ya know, so I show them what they can do, with choosing the right wording and layout. We do a little bit of everything: flyers posters, magnets. Everything.”

She admits that a lot of that job is simply knowing how to use your tools. “My degree was worth it to know how to use the software... so I can work at Office Max for \$8.50.” Again, her strange laugh rings out, and she wings an eyebrow upward. “To learn the machines it takes training, but anyone can be trained on it. Desktop publishing, though... you need to have a knack for it. And I do.”

Karen seems to have a knack for a lot of things. Walking into the apartment she shares with her boyfriend of two years, she proudly shows off her own workroom. “Most people have to wait till after their kids get married before they get their own crafty room.” With a bachelor of fine arts and a concentration in studio arts, it's little wonder that that there are paint trays, brushes, driftwood, and other pieces spread across the floor.

The odd part is the relative neatness of her mess. Paint brushes are all to the left side, clean and dry, lying on newspaper, and the trays are dry, if not cleaned out. The floors and walls aren't covered in paint, but a sturdy non-descript carpeting, with tool boxes neatly labeled against the wall. One reads "Exact-O Knives," another "Beads and Stuff". On a small corner table rests a sewing machine her mother got for her when she was a senior in high school.

A small army of beautiful, hand-painted clay flowers sits in rows against clean newspaper.

"Heh." She blushes, ducks her head, and tucks a piece of hair just long enough behind her ear. "I'm getting ready for a vendors show." It is her first one, and though she expresses concern, there is a quiet look of pride on her face as she outlines her pieces.

"See? These... they're all miniature. I want people to look at them and go, 'Oh!' But then look again and realize they don't know exactly what they are." She touches a red one softly, showing the pin that rests against the back of it. "Except for the driftwood, all the pieces are pendants, kind of jewelry sculptures."

"They're realistic, but also fantasy." Karen talks excitedly, almost scholarly, about rainforests and colors. "And ocean life," she adds on an intake of air. She uses nature, first-hand sketches and books to inspire her.

"Mill Creek Park is a great local place I like to go and look at things... I like forests with overgrowth and wild flowers, fields and ravines with cricks. I always have a camera with me at a new place in case I see a new plant, or the way they grow. There's an infinite variety of how plants grow." She gestures with her hands while she speaks, gnarling them like tree roots, or spreading them expansively to indicate the fields.

She has artist's hands; thin fingers, well-shaped nails, and capable palms as she handles a small piece of driftwood.

"I use Sculpey, and just mold it on the wood. When it bakes, it shrinks just the tiniest bit, and it fits perfectly, then I can just paint it." Each piece of wood is different from the last, impossibly delicate clay strings of seaweed formed and twisting around it, and bright corals growing next to them.

Tugging on a piece of hair, a habit she hasn't broken since she got her hair cut a year and a half ago, she says thoughtfully, "In school, I was academic. I was always more into sciences. But I wanted to follow my art path instead." She laughs, like she's embarrassed. "They're completely opposite, ya know? Art... research, and details... But I still incorporate that into my art... I wanted to bring that to my art."

"Math," she blurts out of the blue. "Like math is a science. But then, fractals... You look at them in their visual form and it's beautiful."

She tugs at the nametag on her Office Max polo shirt in a green that matches her seaweed. "Opposing schools of thought, brought together in a visual form, that creates beauty."

Karen smiles, like an answer just hit her. "Scientific art."