

Gamaliel and the Mouse
By
Lois A. Jones

As I picked up a box from the store room shelf, a shrill scream erupted spontaneously from my mouth. A small mouse had scurried down my arm! Probably as frightened as I was, it dashed across the floor, almost crashing into the far wall in its fervent desire to escape. Regaining my composure, I stood stock still as I watched it race about the room, seeking another place to hide. Its fearful demeanor reminded me of one of my students, Gamaliel.

A young man from a poor Central American country, Gamy longed to escape as well, fearful of his confinement here in prison. He had made a careless and perhaps foolish mistake since coming to America. Although I had never asked him why he had been incarcerated, I could tell from his demeanor that he wanted only to leave the prison, this place that caused him unbearable emotional torment. The bars and fences that hemmed him in constantly reminded him of his guilt and shame.

Over the many weeks that I had him as a student in my art class, Gamy struggled to learn how to use colored pencils in his drawings, skillfully building layer upon layer through the use of complimentary colors, creating light and dark areas to enhance the depth of his compositions. His works began to exude vibrancy. As he grasped the full value of the techniques he learned, his talent became more and more apparent. He became less withdrawn and more relaxed in his work. Creativity had become a temporary but important way to escape his ever present state of confinement.

One day he started to draw a portrait of his conception of the Virgin Mary, executing many of the skills he was mastering. Several months later he showed me a beautifully finished piece of art. The Virgin's hands were holding prayer beads; light emanated from the background, enhancing her dark hair and scarf. A candle was burning off to one side, adding an additional soft glow to her beautifully rendered face. I praised him sincerely for this extremely well done achievement. "I send this to my mother!" he exclaimed proudly. "You teach me much."

I thanked him, quite moved by his developing skills and talent. I told him that he must strive to foster his gift. He nodded in agreement as he left to go back to his cell. "You have great talent; you must continue to nurture it!" I called after him.

Several weeks later he lingered hesitantly after class. I sensed that he was deeply troubled about something. "What's bothering you, Gamy?" I asked.

His head hung down in sorrow. "You know the picture I do for my mother? The guard, he take it."

I was astounded. “Why?” I asked.

“The guy in the next cell, he want to see the picture and I pass it over to him. I did not know that this is forbidden to do—no one tell me that!”

I struggled with my feelings for this poor young man who spoke only broken English and was now the victim of a misunderstanding of confinement rules.

“I’m so sorry to hear that. Perhaps you can begin another one like it.”

He shook his head sadly as tears welled up in both our eyes. He turned and walked dejectedly out of the classroom and back to his cell.

From that time on Gamaliel’s work changed. He no longer attempted to create anything that represented faith or loveliness. He began to copy cartoons and simple images without depth or feeling, drawing only primitive objects. I tried to motivate him, but failed miserably. One day he just stopped coming to class.

Gamaliel has now been released, his green card revoked. He will be sent back to the country of his birth to live again in the poverty he came to this country to escape. Like the small mouse, Gamy will probably be confined by the circumstances he sought to escape, struggling to find a way out through the invisible walls that will forever confine him.

Author bio: Lois Jones is a professional artist living in south central Pennsylvania, where she continues to draw inspiration for her paintings. After a career teaching art in the public schools, Ms. Jones now finds fulfillment in helping prison inmates to express themselves through artistic venues.