

Teen of the Week: Gifted artist driven by her competitive nature



By Wendi Winters - For Capital Gazette

Rising Southern High junior Catherine Allen, better known as Cat, 17, of Holland Point, with some of her artwork on display in the school's conference room. Friday, August 10, 2012 10:30 am | *Updated: 1:54 am, Sat Aug 11, 2012.*

Catherine “Cat” Allen is a talented, award-winning artist today thanks to the inspiration — and a touch of sibling rivalry — provided by her older brother Ian.

She was drawn to drawing as a child. Pun intended. She’d spend hours doodling on blank notebook pages. When Ian got interested in art, Cat’s competitive DNA kicked in; she wanted to be just like him. Only better. Ian moved onto other interests, but Cat kept going, graduating from crayons and markers to pastels, watercolors and oil paints.

Cat, 17, is a rising senior at Southern High School. She is a resident of Holland Point, a small community just inside the border between Anne Arundel and Calvert counties.

Her interest in art has had an impact in both counties. Several years ago, her mother, Stacy Allen, also an artist, painted a mural on the south wall of the North Beach Visitors Center on the bay front town’s boardwalk. Recently, Cat and her mother noticed the mural was faded and chipped. They sanded, repainted and freshened up the beach-themed painting.

For a project at the Bridge Marina in Deale, Cat corralled two other talented Southern High artists, Jazz Webb and Zoe Kasprzyk, to paint a mural across the large sliding doors of the marina's cinderblock storehouse. Their efforts produced a life-sized powerboat roaring across the two doors, tossing a spray of painted water and foam. Above it, the young artists captured a bass in mid-air as it leaps from the water. They signed the mural with their painted-daubed palm prints.

Originally interested solely in illustration, Cat's horizons have expanded. "I got into the gifted and talented arts program in eighth grade at Southern Middle," she recalled. "It was a Saturday course, held from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. during the summer months. Many of the other kids were painting in a realistic style. I was competitive and super-critical of my stuff. I wanted to be good like everyone else there."

Once the school year begins in less than a month, Cat, an A student, will take up the reins as president of the school's chapter of the National Art Honor Society. During her junior year, she undertook a feat rare for juniors: She not only took the AP studio art drawing portfolio exam, but earned a perfect score of 5.

"Only three other students have taken that exam their junior year in my 17 years at Southern," said a stunned Michael Bell, chair of Southern High's art department. "All of them went on to major art schools on scholarships."

This year, Bell plans to nominate Cat for the NAEA National Rising Star Award, given annually to one student selected from candidates from across the country. He said, "We've won this prestigious award two previous years and look for Cat to take home the prize."

Cat also continues in the gifted and talented program, which, Bell said, "features the best of the best 36 artists" in sixth through 12th grades in the county. Bell added, "Her paintings are phenomenal."

The young artist's method of expression changes with the project in front of her. She works fluidly in oil, but also uses Photoshop and mixed media. "I usually try to incorporate objects or torn paper into my artworks," Cat said.

One of her oils shows a series of six-layered portraits on a black background. The five portraits in the rear are rendered in black and white; the one in the foreground is in full color. All six have dark, soulless eyes.

A moody painting shows a sad-eyed woman staring at the viewer while seated in the passenger seat of a vehicle, swaddled in white. Another depicts two teenage girls seated at a table sipping coffee and texting. A third cup on the table isn't rendered in paint. It's the result of a happy accident. Cat dropped her coffee cup in the midst of creating the work and it split in two. A few dabs of glue incorporated it into the tableside scene.

One painting depicts the exaggerated, unhappy face of recent Southern High graduate Tyler Mills. Petulant, he sticks out his tongue. Hanging nearby, still another portrait graphically displays a young girl who must have bitten into a particularly sour lemon. In addition to being an artist and illustrator, Cat's mother is a special education instructor at Sunderland Elementary School in Calvert County. Robert Allen Jr., her father, is a former printer. Older brothers Jesse, 23, and Ian, 22, live in Virginia. Younger brother John Brady, 12, attends the Bates Middle School Art Magnet Program in Annapolis.

Though a whole year of high school is still ahead, Cat is already considering several of the top East Coast art institutions for the following four years. Pratt Institute, Rhode Island School of Design and Maryland Institute College of Art are among the schools on her list. "I'm hoping to earn a bachelor of fine arts degree," she said, "and maybe minor in acting or theater. Perhaps, I'll go abroad for graduate school."