



COMMUNITY

## 'New lease on life': Studio becomes fresh start for Skaneateles artist, Spafford schoolhouse

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SPAFFORD — Heather Bruno-Sears was looking for a fresh start.

The Skaneateles native had made up her mind and was all set to go: She had put all of her belongings in storage and was preparing to move to San Diego to work with a decorative arts industry leader there.

"I just wanted a fresh start and had my heart set," she said. "Having been born and raised in Skaneateles and this Finger Lakes region, I wanted to go live on the West Coast for awhile and just have a fresh start."

But, shortly after she made the decision to move, her grandfather, her best friend — "My grandparents

were my absolute best friends. We were just very, very close," Bruno-Sears said — was in need of caregiving, so she decided to stay and help him through that process until he passed away.

So, Bruno-Sears and her mother and aunts took turns caring for her grandfather. One Sunday morning, she took him out for breakfast and decided to take the long way back to his home on Otisco Lake with a drive around Skaneateles Lake.

And that's when, "just by complete chance," she said, they happened upon Spafford School District No. 1 — also called the Nunnery School because it is located on Nunnery Road — an abandoned one-room stone schoolhouse.

"We drove past this place, and it was all overgrown," Bruno-Sears said. "The yard was completely overgrown with wild bamboo and burdock. I saw this neat little stone building that was just absolutely dilapidated and a 'For Sale by Owner' sign out front. ... I fell in love with it at first sight."

She didn't know what the building was at first, but she "literally did a U-turn in the road and came back," she said, and called the phone number on the sign.

"I just felt like it was just meant to be," Bruno-Sears said. "When I inquired and found out it was a circa 1814 schoolhouse, that's when I really became smitten because I've always had a great appreciation of antiquities and antiques and ancient cultures and just old things."

She learned that the building was a one-room schoolhouse — one of five altogether in the Spafford district — from 1814, the time early settlers first came to the area, to the 1940s, when the Skaneateles Central School District began forming.

She considers the Nunnery School a sister school to the [Side Hill School](#), which was established in 1813 and is now owned by the Spafford Area Historical Society, because the schools are from the same time period whereas the other three were built in later years.

The Nunnery School, unlike the others, is made out of stone that was quarried locally and carried by oxen-drawn wagon to the site. After its school days were over, a family lived there "pretty rustically for a couple decades," Bruno-Sears said, and then the structure was abandoned.

"When I found it, it was all boarded up with a dirt floor, a huge hole in the roof, the stone walls were all compromised and crumbling because the roof had been rotted for so many years. It was probably another winter or two away from the back wall just giving way," she said. "I guess I just felt like I was the person

meant to save it. I knew it would need a tremendous amount of work."

'Every square inch'

Just as some people ask, "Why not," where others ask, "Why," Bruno-Sears saw the site of the studio and showroom for her decorative arts business where others might have simply seen a falling-down eyesore.

She specializes in all sorts of hand-wrought surface designs for interiors, and in between work for her business, she spent the last seven years giving new life to the abandoned schoolhouse as the Finger Lakes Academy of Decorative Arts.

First, she cleared away the overgrowth around the outside of the building and then went to work on the exterior: There was a lightning bolt crack through the side of the building, two corners were giving way, two window sills had given way and 25 percent of the stones "crumbled like a jigsaw puzzle," she said, with the freezing and thawing of the structure.

Along with repairing the stone walls and replacing the roof, Bruno-Sears and her work crew installed attic trusses to add some height to the building and room for a bedroom loft and office upstairs.

The crew also squared off the front of the building and added a small balcony onto the back off of the bedroom.

She repurposed the original floorboards to make the staircase and then stenciled the rules of the classroom on each of the steps. A stenciled compass on the landing between flights points to true north, she said.

Using "every square inch of the building," Bruno-Sears said she added storage under the staircase that she built out to look like paneling and uses to store her supplies. In the office, she built cedar-lined closet space in the attic trusses.

The crew put spray foam insulation within the 18-inch-thick stone walls and installed radiant heating in the floor.

"It's very cozy in the winter and nice and cool in the summer," Bruno-Sears said.

Around the outside of the building, Bruno-Sears turned to one of her favorite hobbies — gardening — and planted perennial gardens with an orchard that includes blueberry and raspberry bushes.

"It's been fun to really bring the property back to life and beautify it," she said. "It's like a quaint little English cottage estate in the countryside."

Bruno-Sears said she has about a year left to go to complete the renovations with what she called "icing on the cake" decorative finishes

"Structurally, the renovation is done but I'm still fine-tuning more ornamental ceilings and painted ceilings and decorative glass treatments," she said. "I was just thrilled to be able to salvage something I felt was precious in the community and it would have been a shame to lose."

'Heart of the building'

Her crew for the schoolhouse project included her father, Reggie Sears, and other family members and friends, as well as local craftsman and tradesman with whom she was familiar through her prior work.

"Everybody was just thrilled to be a part of it and was so supportive," she said. "It was a real community effort in that regard — family, friends and locals. ... It was great bonding time. It really was."

Bruno-Sears said she and her father spent the weekends over two summers repointing the exterior stone walls — chiseling out the old mortar, replacing it with a hand-mixed, traditional batch of Portland cement, sand and lime, and replacing some stones.

Along the way, she said she took "thousands of photographs" of the work and the people involved with it.

"It's been fun to document the process," Bruno-Sears said. "That's been a real reward of having patience with it because everything was such a process, but to document it and see it evolve, I can look back form year to year. Not only that but have fond memories of who helped do what."

As family and friends helped Bruno-Sears renovate the schoolhouse into her studio, the community looked on with interest and support.

One person, she said, was an elderly neighbor who was in one of the last classes to graduate from the Nunnery School in the 1940s. The woman's daughter brought her to the schoolhouse one day, and the woman pointed out where such things as the chalkboard and the stove had been located.

"The entire community, my neighbors and everyone, has been so supportive and encouraging and stops

by quite a bit to see what's going on and check on the progress and cheer me on," Bruno-Sears said.

She said the Spafford Area Historical Society also was supportive, and when members saw the dedication and follow-through she put into the project, they gave her the old school bell to put in the building.

"It was like the heart of the building came back home," Bruno-Sears said, adding that she hopes to remount it.

She also researched and located an 1814 American flag to hang on the front the building.

"I'm thrilled to have been able to salvage the building," she said. "In shoring it up and renovating it, I really hope it's around for another 200 years. ... It's been a little gem in the community. I feel like it was meant to be, and I'm just really thrilled that I had the chance."

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### 'Old-world tradition'

The Finger Lakes Academy of Decorative Arts, as the schoolhouse is known in terms of Bruno-Sears' business, offers a sort of life-size sample of the different techniques she uses in her work.

Those decorations include etched glass treatment on the windows for both ornament and privacy as well as interior plantation shutters. Other techniques include etched and gilded glass and reverse gilding.

She also makes furniture finishes by putting a distressed black or chalk paint finish over natural wood and uses figure painting and faux finishes inspired by her travels to Spain and Morocco. She also creates ornamental ceilings and walls with stenciling, along with concrete carpet designs.

"I just thought this would be a great place to showcase my hand-wrought surface design options and finishes that I offer, like a working studio," Bruno-Sears said. "It just struck me as having that potential, and I thought it would be a great place to work from and use as a showroom for my finishes."

With the word academy in the name of the business, Bruno-Sears said she eventually would like to teach classes in her studio, calling it "almost a tradition in my field."

She said she largely taught herself decorative painting and experimented with surface design, but she also took time to study with industry leaders in California, Ohio, Connecticut and New York City.

"It's almost like that old-world tradition of the master and an apprentice. I so cherished the opportunity to study with people who are at the top of my field nationally and internationally and learn from them and bring it back home to central New York to offer it for my clients," Bruno-Sears said. "Someday when I'm older and don't want to be on three tiers of scaffolding working on an ornamental ceiling, I feel as though it would be great to pass the baton to have classes and teach the next generation of decorative artisans."

After 18 years of being self-employed after starting out her career at MacKenzie-Childs, Bruno-Sears said she expanded from decorative painting into any medium that can be manipulated and hopes to pass her skills on to others.

"It's a wonderful studio and showroom and creative retreat, and eventually in the future, I see it being a great opportunity to share my skills with other people who are interested in learning them as a trade or as a hobby," she said. "Many people enjoy doing this sort of thing in their own home, but I've been able to carve out a nice niche career out of it."

'Magical experience'

Needless to say, Bruno-Sears didn't end up moving to California — but she still got her fresh start and found it in that abandoned one-room stone schoolhouse on Nunnery Road.

From taking care of her grandfather before he died to renovating the schoolhouse into her studio, she said she "evolved back around to staying here and being here" and realized that the Finger Lakes region is such a beautiful area that she wanted to stay there.

"If I want to go to California, I'll go there for vacations," Bruno-Sears said. "I'll just fulfill that little bit of wanderlust with some great traveling."

Her business is all word of mouth, she said, and it has grown in the years since she found the schoolhouse and started working on it.

"The clientele and just the projects have been so wonderful that I realized I'm really blessed and pretty productive here," she said of her business. "It literally circled back around to nurturing this project and resettling in the area."

That circling back included meeting Bill Carroll, whom Bruno-Sears called "the man of my dreams ... the absolute love of my life."

"I believe there's a reason for everything, from taking my grandfather for that Sunday drive to finishing this place to ending up staying here," Bruno-Sears said. "Business is doing well, and I fell in love. There are reasons for everything. ... It's just been a great, magical experience."

Bruno-Sears wasn't the only one who got a fresh start, though — so did the Nunnery School, which appears to be celebrating its future while honoring its past.

"It feels like a breath of fresh air, and it has just a whole new lease on life with its roots," she said.

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## MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about Heather Bruno-Sears and the Finger Lakes Academy of Decorative Arts, visit [heatherbrunosears.com](http://heatherbrunosears.com).

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