Dad’s tough love and support went far

ELIZABETH BARLOW was well into her adult years, working full time for the San Francisco Opera, and an accomplished academic with a master’s degree in Jeffersonian history from the University of Virginia when her father offered the kind of advice a nurturing parent loves to dispense:

“You have talent,” he told her after looking over one of her early watercolor paintings. “But if you’re going to do this, you need to get serious.”

The comment was a stunning compliment and “tough love” in equal measures. Her dad, Philip Barlow, ranked with the best known painters in the Western United States. He was a realist, as an artist and as a mentor.

“He was tough. I think the best artists are very critical, and my dad was critical, but in a very supportive way,” said Barlow, whose father died in October 2018 at age 85.

“I’d often dread showing him one of my paintings, telling myself, ‘He’s going to find something, I know it,’” she added with a laugh. “He’d make a suggestion ... sometimes I’d argue back ... sometimes I wouldn’t do it ... but often he’d be dead right.”

He was right about her talent. Barlow tapped into her DNA to become an accomplished realist painter in her own right, albeit with a much different approach.

“I think my eye and my appreciation for realism were formed by my father, but I feel like my work has a more contemporary edge, whereas he was more classical,” she said. “I used to paint much more classically — a still life of something sitting on a tabletop ... things like that. And I’ve had my experimen-

Carmel’s artists

By DENNIS TAYLOR

nal phases. But I think I’ve come to a place now where I’m feeling very comfortable with the things I’m doing.”

Many of her recent paintings are sexy arrangements that imply romance: a glass of wine and a martini, side by side, backed by an ocean sunset ... a golf ball snuggling next to a tube of red lipstick ... formal footwear, male and female, that seem to have been jettisoned in a rush ...

She also does “portraits,” commissions meant to depict the essence of Barlow’s clients through a collection of inanimate objects that are personal and meaningful in their lives.

“It’s often very emotional when a client sees the painting. They’re looking at their most cherished possessions, which someone else has arranged to tell a visual story,” she said. “It’s often something that can become a family heirloom, to be passed down to their children.”

Cambridge

Barlow remembers herself as a “bookish” child who grew up in a home filled with artwork by her father and others, and a life filled with excursions to museums, galleries and art openings.

While in graduate school...
in Virginia, she fell in love with her first husband, who whisked her away to Europe when he was hired by a firm in Cambridge, England.

“We lived there for four years (1985-1989), and even though we were young and poor, we went to every single museum in England, and we went to Paris five times a year to visit the Louvre,” said Barlow, who worked in Cambridge as an assistant to the president of a women’s college.

Barlow’s life changed with a divorce and a return to the United States. She found work with the San Francisco Opera, first doing public relations, then booking the talent for the opera.

“I was there for 15 years (1991-2006), and it was a big job, but when you work for an arts organization, you’re surrounded by people who love art,” she said. “And those people were very supportive of my own art.”

Georgia O’Keefe

That’s when she began dabbling more seriously with the paintings she shared with her father, who urged her to seize the day.

“He said, ‘Now you need the foundation. Sign up for an art class,’” she remembered. “So, I took a class at a community college first, and then I heard about the art program at UC Berkeley and decided to do that. It took me four years to get through, because I also had a full-time job, but I did it.”

At Berkeley, Barlow took multiple classes from celebrated San Francisco artist Donald Bradford, whom she credits with making a significant impact on her art. He subsequently became a close friend.

In 2004, she met her current husband, Wall Street retiree Stephen McClellan. In 2006, he suggested she leave the San Francisco Opera and pursue art on a full-time basis. The same year, he took her to Santa Fe, where he secretly pulled strings to arrange a private tour of Abiquiu, the home of Barlow’s favorite artist, Georgia O’Keefe.

“Their public tours were completely booked up, but Steve made a donation to the museum there in exchange for a private tour,” she said. “I think that’s probably when I realized, ‘This man really loves me. He’s the guy for me.’”

They also spent a springtime in New York City, where she enrolled in the legendary Art Students League. “I went to class every day and just immersed myself in a place where Georgia O’Keefe and Mark Rothko had studied. I wanted to let the whole experience seep into every pore of my being,” she said.

Sundial Inn

McClellan and Barlow were married at Spanish Bay in 2006, and in 2015 moved to Carmel, settling into a rental home a block from Carmel Beach.

“We were only here two months before Steve said, ‘I’m never leaving,’” she said. “We love living so close to the beach. We love being able to walk to town. I can walk to my studio. It’s all wonderful.”

The studio she rents at Church of the Wayfarer overlooks L’Auberge Carmel, the hotel at Monte Verde Street and Seventh Avenue that was once the Sundial Inn. “We vacationed in Carmel as a family, and we always stayed at the Sundial Inn, well into my adulthood,” said Barlow, who embraces those memories today whenever she glances out the window.

Her art can be seen online at elizabethbarlowart.com, and she is represented professionally by the Andra Norris Gallery in Burlingame.