BARBARA LEIGHTON'S Second Chance Art Centre

By SUZANNE ZWARUN

By the time he was eleven, it was becoming clear to everybody that David was a lost cause. His Grade 4 teachers were the latest to try to reach him, interest him in something . . . anything. When they failed, the school principal called in his mother for a conference.

"Maybe," he suggested, gently, to the mother, "you should try praising him whenever he does something right."

The mother had already thought of that. "The trouble is, " she sighed, "he never does anything that you could possibly praise him for."

When David was dispatched to summer art classes at the Leighton Centre, no one had much hope that things would change. But the boy, after a faint-hearted start, surprised everyone. He turned out to be the best student in the class. On Award's Day, David turned up with a fresh haircut and a new suit and, when his name was called, he marched proudly up the aisle to collect his watercolors and paper prize. His classmates – with the instinctive understanding of children – knew just how important the award was to David. They all rose to their feet and applauded.

"His face was simply shining," Barbara Leighton remembers, "that one little boy made our whole year worthwhile. If we hadn't done another thing, we'd at least helped a little boy discover that he could do something worthwhile."

For Barbara Leighton, who has spent more than a decade fashioning a dream into a reality, David's new found pride in himself is one tangible evidence that she, too, is doing something worthwhile.

The Leighton Centre, near Millarville, south of Calgary, is growing into an art community. It is reaching people of all ages, from all over Alberta. It is teaching them about art, beauty, nature, giving them an appreciation of activities that will last them a lifetime. And if the centre is chronically short of money, so what? Barbara Leighton merely shrugs her large shoulders and goes out to buy another painting.

She has led an unconventional life. Her 1935 wedding set the tone. An art student who married her teacher, the noted landscape painter A.C. Leighton, Barbara found out, before the wedding, that A.C. held such ceremonies in high disdain. He refused to announce the coming marriage until the day before the event in the hope that no one would turn up on such short notice. He slated the ceremony for 7 a.m. , to make certain no one would be there. And instead of a stately march back down the aisle, the couple galloped out the door because the disapproving organist started into the Wedding March instead of the Beethoven A.C. had ordered him to play.

The bride's mother, of course, did the conventional thing and held a reception to which everyone came. Everyone, that is, except the bride and groom. A.C. had a saddled string of horses waiting outside the church. By the time the wedding guests had converged on the reception, the Leightons were halfway to the hills. They didn't ride home again for six weeks.

Life with Leighton was like that. Barbara recalls him arriving home one afternoon after completing a particularly arduous assignment in Calgary. They were leaving in the morning for Ireland, he

announced. And they did – abandoning dishes in the sink and unmade beds. It was three years before they arrived back in Canada.

She gave up her own art during the 30 years they were married. There can only be one artist in a family, she says; particularly with a landscape artist, you have to be ready to drop everything on the spur of the moment and go where the landscape is. Then, when A.C. died, Barbara was on her own. Middle-aged, rusty, uncertain of her direction, she drifted for a time, then started making up for lost time. In the late 1960s, with great trepidation, she went back to art school to study fabrics and metal. She felt a kinship with such "intuitive" arts, she says, and it was clear to her that she couldn't attempt landscape painting, after knowing her husband's work. It turned out to be a shrewd choice; she won visual arts scholarships two years running.

Leighton worked in fabric and metal, produced prints of her late husband's watercolors, and found it wasn't enough. Looking around at the country home her husband left her, she decided she wanted to share it.

A.C. had bought the site with his usual panache. They'd built ten houses during his lifetime and he was casting around for a site for the eleventh when he drove out toward Millarville to see some advertised land.

In the 1950s, country acreages were a trend of the future. The advertised land was good farmland and the farmer selling it thought A.C. demented when he rejected it because it had no view.

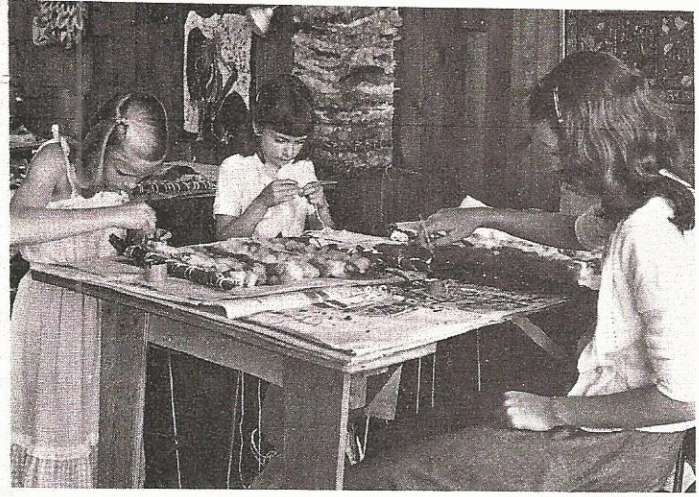
"Well, if it's view you want," said a neighboring farmer watching this curious transaction, "I got view and I wouldn't mind getting rid of it." A.C. climbed the hill and saw below him the green foothills rolling to the Rocky Mountains – 300 miles of mountain range visible at a glance. He bought it on the spot, making out the bill of sale on his sketch pad, using his lucky $100 bill for the down-payment.

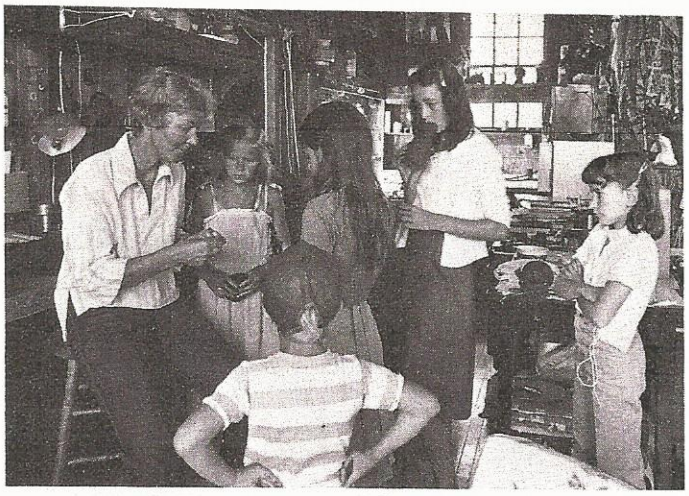
The house – built a room at a time whenever A.C. sold a painting to finance the next step – was thrown open to the first art classes Barbara gave. Looking around here, she decided rural women had little chance to express themselves. The old country crafts had been lost and farm women, tied to children coming on the school bus and husbands wanting lunch, were unable to take courses of interest in the city.

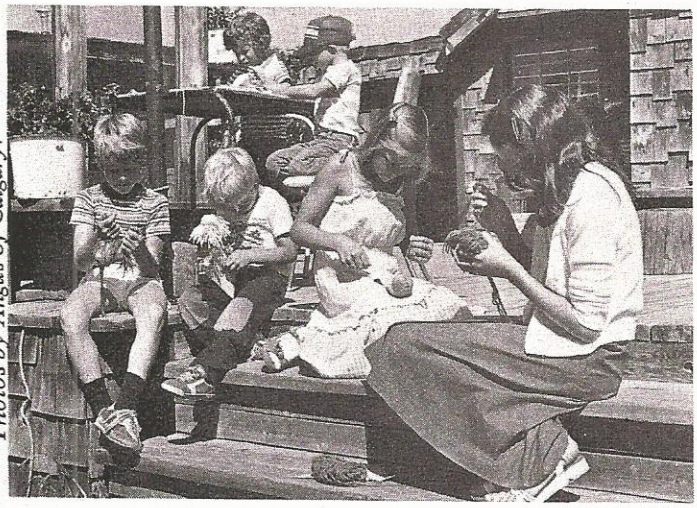
Barbara felt she could give a new dimension to their lives. "Have you ever seen a woman whose home didn't reflect her creativity?" she asked as she began her first classes. "All housewives are instinctive creators – look at the care with which they arrange their furniture, put food on a plate." So she set them to working with fabric which, by then, had become almost a way of life for her. Tie dyeing, batik, block painting – all had their own techniques and results and she hoped to give her students enough basic knowledge so that they could continue the work at home. She envisioned them making their own clothes, draperies and house accessories. Her idea didn't work. By the time Leighton got her classes going, the farms around Calgary had been gobbled up by city acreage owners. Leighton suspected the few farm husbands left didn't help either. "I began to believe art was a dirty word with farmers. Perhaps they thought even the $3. a lesson (just to cover materials) was a waste. They seemed to feel their wives should be home baking cakes for supper."

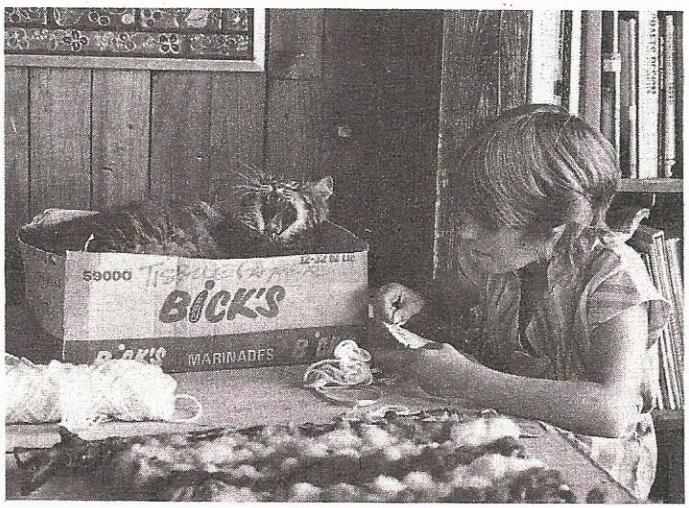
But, by then, there was no question of giving up the centre. Calgarians, both young and old, were making the tortuous pilgrimage over the winding, dangerous country roads to learn batik, hand pottery, and weaving and Leighton was keeping the centre open seven days a week to accommodate them.

The centre first spread from the Leighton house to the Ballihanish school,









Photos by Angus of Calgary.

an elderly, abandoned, one-room schoolhouse stituated at the bottom of her laneway. She'd heard one day the school, with two acres of land, was up for bids and raced to High River.

"I want to bid on the school," she told the clerk.

"Go right ahead," he said.

It took the clerk a long time to get Leighton to understand she had to name her bid. When she finally decided to bid "$200 more than the highest other bid," she was crushed to be told that was "the oldest trick in the book." Desperate, she reckoned no one else would pay $1,000 for an abandoned schoolhouse. She was right.

Since the school house, remodelled by Alberta sculptor and jeweller Zared Racher, was opened in 1970, the centre has expanded to other buildings. A weaving studio boasts windows low enough for weavers to take in the view as they work. A pottery studio, jammed with wheels and kilns, has also been opened. And there's a woodworking studio. Plus an art gallery opened in the house.

"Paintings in a private house have much more effect on people than they do in a gallery," says Leighton. "In a gallery, most people are always slightly uneasy. There's a cold, impersonal feeling to a gallery that makes art a dead thing." When she tours people, especially children, through her gallery, she has them heft a whalebone carving to see how light it is, lift a bronze to feel its weight. The collection, including an extensive display of A.C. Leighton's work (some of which, she notes wryly, she rebought at ten times more than the price at which he sold it) totals about 60 paintings now – all chosen by Barbara and all donated to the non-profit centre foundation.

But the formal art gallery art is but a sampling of the centre's wares. The cedar shake-covered buildings are stuffed with wall hangings, ceramics, batiks, dried weeds in jugs – the works of students and teachers. People are coming from as far away as Red Deer and Slave Lake for weekend seminars; week-long children's classes throughout the summer are filled with youngsters doing primitive weaving, puppetry, copper enamelling, woodworking, stitchery, printing.

Mostly, the centre is run by volunteers and its annual operating budget – about $16,000 – is raised by various means, such as the annual October art sale, featuring such prominent western artists as Rick Grandmaison, Illingworth Kerr, Stan Perriot, Willy Zack and Richard Roenish. ("I just call them up and ask them to give us something," says Barbara matter-of-factly.)

Ann Harp, the centre's volunteer manager, and Roma Jones, the paid help have oriented their work towards primitive art. In the beeswax and cedar-scented studios, or outside in the open pit kiln, students are encouraged to drink in the countryside as they do work that relates to their surroundings – clay is hand moulded, fires are banked with horse dung, children are encouraged to see art in found objects.

"It's a unique experience,"says Harp. "The atmosphere is conducive to creativity. It's peaceful, relaxing, a gorgeous place. People arriving for the first time often say, 'Yes, I could stay here and do some work.' " Some go on to make their art a living: Rod Downey, an ex rodeo rider paralyzed in an accident, was taking silversmithing there this summer after finding nowhere in the city a class that could accommodate a wheelchair occupant.

But whether it is a six-year-old elbow deep in pottery's clay or a grandmother making batiks, they're being awakened to a new world, Leighton feels. "I could have gone around the world once a year on the money I've spent on this place," she allows. But it's obvious she likes the choice she made. "If you can just open their eyes a little bit, it's been worthwhile," she says. Δ