



Art is a lifestyle for Tom Kilian and his family, including his wife, Sandie, and their children, Thomas and Helen.

Banking On Art

Tyrrell County Artist Tom Kilian has a simple vision: For Inner Banks artists to make a living where they live.

WRITTEN BY MOLLY HARRISON • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIZABETH ZONGOLOWICZ

Souhegan. I'm driving down Old Columbia Road just past downtown Columbia, looking for a farm by that name. In a yard to my left, I spot several spine-like spires of carefully stacked cypress knees, a sculptural arrangement of firewood, and a mini Stonehenge. These aren't the types of things you see in Tyrrell County front yards. This has to be the place.

Tyrrell County artist Tom Kilian greets me with a friendly handshake. Kilian and his wife, Sandie, bought the 1826 farmhouse and small farm that is Souhegan six years ago. After traveling to various parts of the world as a minister and working in a range of jobs from craftsman to salesman to executive, Kilian felt a pull to change the family's lifestyle in the simple surroundings of the country. At Souhegan, the Kilians homeschool their twins, Thomas and Helen, raise chickens and goats, and live a creative life.

Kilian is now a full-time artist devoted to art as a lifestyle and a process. He concentrates on public art, wood sculpture, and bronze. Living art takes him from making daily videos to put on YouTube.com to writing a column for the Florida-published *Life in Art* to sculpting yard art with found and natural materials to helping his children create to crafting ambitious public art commissions and seeking a patron for his bronze monument "One" for Darfurian relief. One of his

most recent works is titled "15 for Darfur," composed of 15 digitally created works on canvas, which Kilian exhibited in five North Carolina cities.

Inspired solution

Kilian is committed to this life. "This lifestyle is a choice," he says. "You have to stand up daily to

"The region has substance, honesty, and simplicity, but it doesn't have anything but farming and fishing to hold people here."

the pressures of society about what success is." But he shares the conflict that many other artists in his part of the state experience. The spectacularly beautiful region — with its sounds and rivers, farms and forests, wildlife and birds, small towns and simple lives, genuine people and slow pace — provides nearly every inspiration an artist could desire. Yet, it's extremely difficult for an artist, or anyone else, to make a living there.

"It's painful to see that this beautiful place doesn't have an economic base," says Kilian. "The

region has substance, honesty, and simplicity, but it doesn't have anything but farming and fishing to hold people here."

Kilian saw his fellow regional artists struggling with the same issues, and he knew they needed to connect. "We need to get on the same page if we're going to help the next generation thrive and prosper," he says.

Serendipitously, in March 2008, Kilian learned



Photographer Jean Olecki captures the stark beauty of a fading Inner Banks farm in her "Under the Elm."

Kilian walked away energized and hopeful that eastern North Carolina's Inner Banks could one day be recognized for its prosperous artistic economy.

"I took it seriously," says Kilian. "I left that workshop to go forward with promoting the artistic economy on the Inner Banks. As simple as it sounds, after that weekend I came home, spent \$7.96 on a domain name, and started a website."

of a workshop in Rocky Mount called "Creating an Artistic Economy in Eastern N.C.," sponsored by the Foundation of Economic Renewal in Eastern North Carolina (FoR ENC). FoR ENC, now dissolved into the Kenan Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was a group of regional leaders who worked to inspire and enhance entrepreneurship in eastern North Carolina. The group used the term "Inner Banks" as a way to brand and unify the mostly rural, 22-county area situated between Interstate 95 and the coast.

At the workshop, Kilian heard keynote speaker Becky Anderson of Handmade in America talk about the thriving arts industry that was created in western North Carolina by tapping into the artistic heritage of the region. Kilian listened to eastern North Carolina artists, community leaders, citizens, and merchants talk about cultivating their artist communities. He listened to Frank Dooley of FoR ENC encourage communities to identify their "found objects," the people who create the art that makes the Inner Banks unique, people like boat builders, net makers, and wood-carvers.

IBXarts.org

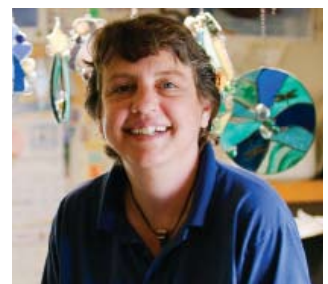
The resulting site, IBXarts.org, compiles and promotes the far-flung, independent artists in the Inner Banks region. The nonprofit site lists artists and galleries by county and upcoming arts-related events. It also includes short features on artists, with links to their sites. The site even includes an invitation to artists to move the area under the heading, "Migration Aid."

Everything is promoted for free; all artists or organizations have to do is sign up and link in. Kilian, however, does have standards for inclusion on the site.

"There are two questions I ask myself when approaching promotion at IBXarts," says Kilian. "One, is the gallery, studio, artist, event, or community within the 22-county IBX region? Two, is the thrust of the above to incubate or encourage regionally located artists whose income will derive off the sales of their work? I am not as anxious to provide coverage that meanders from our goal of anchoring an artistic economy on the Inner Banks."

Onslow County painter and gallery owner Sherry Thurston joined the IBXarts site because of its Inner

Tom Kilian (**below left** with his bird sculpture and Jesus painting) designed IBXarts.org to give people like glass artist Alison Ellis of Swan Quarter (**below, far right**) a network of support and exposure to a broader audience.



Banks connections. “When I found out Tom was doing so much on the Inner Banks, I thought that was cool,” says Thurston, who has owned Thurston Art Gallery in Sneads Ferry for 29 years. “The focus is always on the coast or larger cities. It’s difficult to be an Inner Banks artist. You have to pull people in to get them to stop on their way to the beach, and that’s a big effort. We’re doing everything we can to get people in.”

Kilian describes the strata of IBXarts as composed of

native artists, who have grown up on the Inner Banks and seek to invite folks to the region; found-art artists, who had not known that their work was actually an art and now depend, to some extent, on their art to put food on the table; and the immigrant artists, the ones who’ve been inspired by the people and settings of the region and have adapted their art to represent the area.

Washington County photographer Jean Davis Olecki is one of those immigrant artists, having moved to the area from Massachusetts three years ago. She had never called herself an artist until Kilian discovered her photography online and encouraged her to pursue her talents. Olecki now shows and sells work throughout the region, has her own website, and is listed on IBXarts.org.

“It’s nice to see the artist community developing,” says Olecki. “It gives a sense of hope and purpose to this area. We’re in a pretty poor region. We need anything that will bring in people and opportunity and allow our kids to stay here rather than having to leave.”

Promising future

IBXarts.org is a good home base for regional artists to showcase their work. “It’s a valuable resource. This is the only region-wide organization for artists,” says Alison Ellis, who has lived and worked as a glass artist on mainland Hyde County since 1994, although she sells most of her work in galleries on the Outer Banks.

Kilian’s vision is for Inner Banks artists to be able to live and make a living on the Inner Banks rather than having to go elsewhere to sell their work. Ellis admits that’s hard for her to envision now, but says she shares Kilian’s goal of drawing young artists to the region.

“The main thing we agree on is that there is good reason to bring other aspiring artists to



this area to live and work,” says Ellis. “It’s inexpensive to live here, and there’s a lot here to inspire artists. We need to establish a visible community of Inner Banks artists, not only for the benefit of the local economy, but also to attract other, younger artists to the area.”

Frank Dooley, formerly of FoR ENC and now vice president of IBXlifestyles.com and IBXhomes.com, says Kilian is taking the mission of FoR ENC into the future.

“Tom is doing exactly what we always hoped folks here would do,” says Dooley. “He’s bringing people together and elevating the region, and in meaningful ways. The Inner Banks has learned important lessons about marketing and branding, and Tom is one who is carrying that torch in the arts.”

Next in the works for IBXarts is a festival, IBX ARTS FEST, set for May 29, 2010. Kilian’s plan is for artists to gather at Souhegan, exhibit their work for free, and go home with the full proceeds of their work.

Whether it’s for a long weekend or just for a brief stop on the way to the beach, those travelers who take the time to explore the Inner Banks are well rewarded.

Nature, history, wildlife, and the arts are the spoils of an Inner Banks exploration. Fine art is on the Inner Banks just waiting to be discovered, and IBXarts.org will lead you to it. 🌊

Molly Harrison is a freelance writer in Nags Head.

to know more



IBXarts.org expands artists’ Internet presence with profiles, web links, and event news — and goes one step further to establish the region as an arts

destination by inviting artists to relocate to the area and offering assistance with the move.

