



VINNIE WOHLFARTH

by JAN LINLEY

Anyone who has lived in Brookland for awhile has probably met Lavinia (Vinnie) Wohlfarth. And if you haven't met Vinnie yet, it's time you do. Her family has been in Washington since 1822. "We're in the first directory they ever printed here," says Wohlfarth. For almost half

a century, her grandfather had a wholesale hardware business in Brookland. One of six children, she is a lifelong resident and now lives in the house she grew up in.

Wohlfarth attended St. Anthony's school on Monroe Street for 12 years. She says the nuns there were responsible for how she thinks and feels today. A self-described dreamer and "a kid who was staring out the window all the time," Vinnie

says the nuns fostered her creative side while at the same time pushing her to take responsibility and be an achiever.

"Once an achiever always an achiever, I think." This seems like an understatement coming from Vinnie. After St. Anthony's she went to Prince George's Community College for two years where she got an Associate of Arts degree then transferred to Catholic University with a full scholarship. There she studied philosophy and business for a year and a half, later finishing her education at McGill University in Montreal through an exchange student program.

Wohlfarth worked at restaurants to earn money throughout college, but claims her entrepreneurial skills go back to when she was a child. "My clients were all over this neighborhood—for lawns, raking leaves, peeling potatoes. I had money from the time I was nine. I wanted to go the candy counter, and my family didn't have a nickel to give me."

Vinnie worked her way up through the restaurant business waiting tables, then bartending and managing. Eventually, she took her earnings and with a partner bought a restaurant, the Chinese Fry Shop, the first of three she would own in DC and "a big hit." When she left to finish her education at McGill, her partner sold the business.

Proceeds from the sale provided Wohlfarth with the money to start another restaurant after she graduated. For years she loved the business but says that "later on it got terrible." Her last restaurant with another partner was The Collector Art Gallery and Restaurant. Exhausted by the nonstop pace she'd kept for years, Wohlfarth sold the restaurant and took a sabbatical for two years.

"I went to New England and stayed in Provincetown, Massachusetts." During that summer she associated with a local artist community. It was the beginning not only of a recharging of her soul, but of her love affair with art. "After the first summer I was feeling better. It was like somebody sharpening a pencil. All of a sudden I was just feeling tremendous."

She took another year, helped her mother around the house and lived on her boat reflecting on her life and direction. "It made sense for me to take time. That would be the key." The following summer when she returned to Provincetown, friend and portrait painter, Joannette Egeli, told Vinnie an exciting life is a choice and suggested Vinnie represent artists. "From the time she said it to me I started thinking about it, about how much I enjoy all of that." She loved the camaraderie of the art community there. "I came back, and I could visualize my gallery."

Her passion was as much about bringing art to her community as it was representing artists. The possibility of failure never entered her mind, but it wasn't easy in the beginning. "There were a lot of bread sandwiches those years." The building Vinnie bought at 3418 9th St. (now Wohlfarth Galleries) was a mess. Formerly a crack house, it had no plumbing and needed a complete renovation, which Wohlfarth did herself. In order to keep the gallery going during those early years, she learned framing. Hard work, faith and passion paid off. Two years after opening the gallery in Brookland, Vinnie opened another gallery in Provincetown where she now spends her summers.

In 1999 a group of neighbors, concerned about overreaching activity from the H Street Community Development Corporation, came to Vinnie and suggested she start a Brookland Community Development Corporation. She didn't think about it long before deciding to fund it and with two other community members, Lisa Farrell and David Cameron, got it off the ground. The Brookland CDC is responsible for the Festival of Lights, the Farmer's Market and the Brookland Festival amongst other activities. "My community work was and is a commitment to bring these events and services to Greater Brookland. My vision has always been to gather us around our community, and open doors for community leadership to emerge." In addition to being President of the CDC, Wohlfarth is also chair of the Main Street program, which is working on revitalizing 12th Street. You might say Vinnie is Brookland's very own Valentine: "I do love my community."