

Milford's Renaissance Woman

Patti Calistro promotes a cultural revolution

By Jim Motavalli

If sleepy downtown Milford, with empty storefronts, crumbling sidewalks and an indifferent attitude in City Hall, enjoys a cultural renaissance in the '80s, Patti Calistro will be the person to thank for it.

Calistro is both a graphic and a fine artist. She arrived in Milford from her native Los Angeles three years ago, and immediately began inquiring about studio space. "I was told 'there isn't any.' I couldn't believe it, and decided right then to do something about the sad situation."

From that zero base, things have really taken off. With her partner (and soon-to-be husband) Gary Stiewing, Calistro formed River Street Enterprises Inc., an umbrella group encompassing a commercial art business, a non-profit gallery, and a studio and classroom space exclusively for children. To spread her energies around and help revitalize the rest of Milford's center, she founded the Milford Downtown Council. The group, with a broad base of downtown merchants as members, will shortly publish a business directory of Milford Green and surrounding area, complete with early maps and a history of Milford. (Founded in 1639, it is one of Connecticut's oldest settlements.)

Calistro's base is a second-floor walk-up, above a leather store and next to a union hall. It's not exactly a SoHo loft, but it's a light, airy space with plenty of room for her burgeoning enterprises.

In the commercial art room, Studio 3, Calistro does everything from business cards and logos to designs on diesel trucks and wall murals. On display are some of her portraits, huge circular panels with realistic likenesses done in pencil. Wall space is at a premium, but there's room for a community bulletin board announcing upcoming events.

The adjoining art studio (Milford's first gallery!) is newly carpeted and track lit. An exhibition of drawings and sculpture by Milford artist Jan Riviere is on display. Her informal pen, pencil and felt tip excursions are simple but full of character. Likewise the sculptures, which are arrayed on the gallery's unique interchangeable display cubes.

Exhibitions are changed monthly, with area artists paying a \$15 fee and 20 percent commissions on sales. Revenues collected are either used for advertising or plowed back into the business to offset costs. "The Milford Fine Arts Council has 250 members, so I knew there were artists here. Until now, the only places for them to show their works were in art supply stores or in banks. This is a place local artists can call their own."

The Kids' Studio is lined with children's hooks and brightly-colored artists' supplies. Also a non-profit enterprise, it offers introductory art instruction to 30 students (from three to 12-years-old) in five sessions. Free



Patti Calistro: trying to budge an indifferent bureaucracy. (Virginia Blaisdell photo)

expression is emphasized. One week the children will be asked to do self-portraits in clay, and the next they will go out to the local cemetery and learn about texture and relief by doing gravestone rubbings. The cost for 10 classes is \$30, which barely covers materials.

The purpose of the Kids' Studio, says Calistro, is to "enrich and inspire each child's natural talent." She adds that art instruction in the public schools frequently adds up to little more than one 45-minute class every two weeks.

A Proper Atmosphere

As if she weren't busy enough, Calistro has helped to start yet another non-profit enterprise, the Milford Arts Cooperative. Founded just two weeks ago, this organization is seeking a spacious old building to serve as a home for further art classes. It would double as rental studio space for Milford's displaced artists.

"I'm not trying to get rich off all this," she says. "I'm hoping that the commercial

studio will keep me afloat while I try to get these other things off the ground."

Despite an enthusiastic response from town residents and community merchants, Milford Mayor Henry Povinelli has so far remained aloof from this one-woman renaissance. Calistro points out that, in spite of innumerable "action plans," little has been done in the past five years to stop the flight of business from the downtown area. New park benches and a municipal parking lot are just about all that go in the positive column.

"This town has an image problem," says Calistro, "and it's resulted in a 10 percent vacancy rate for downtown stores. We can't entice anyone to move in here until we make Milford a more attractive proposition." The Downtown Council has proposed a range of activities and services, including a shuttle bus for the summer months, a refurbished railroad station, and regular "moonlight sale" nights to keep people in the city past 5:00 p.m.

During Milford's annual Spring Blossom Festival, Calistro plans to dress up as a

clown and lead the young charges from her classes on a parade through the downtown area. "I want to show that the kids have a real stake in their community."

"Art and artists need a proper atmosphere to thrive and grow," Calistro says. "In New Haven they have the Creative Arts Workshop, a whole complex especially for artists. There's never been anything like that here. What we're hoping is that all these new organizations will come together and get things moving. Once people here realize that what is good for the arts is good for Milford, we could really take off."

Catching the stray winds outside River Street Enterprises' studio-office are a cluster of rainbow-hued balloons, symbol of yet one more Calistro enterprise, "The Balloon Boutique." Released, these helium-filled orbs would fly high over the downtown skyline. "I've heard that in New Haven the Arts Council released balloons with message-covered streamers on them for publicity," says Patti. "Maybe we should do that here. I'll try anything to wake this town up."