

Packard honors late son with exhibition of artwork in Provincetown

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As part of this one-day exhibit, opening Friday with a reception from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Leslie Packard Gallery, 398 Commercial St., Packard hopes to pay tribute to the Rev. Ted Wiard, himself a survivor of unspeakable loss, while raising awareness and support for his Golden Willow Retreat, the northern New Mexico center which recently provided her a refuge through her despair.

Still visibly in shock since the July 14 accident, when Blake was struck by a car while walking his bicycle along the side of Route 6, Packard is doing what she can and must to move forward. She personifies a study in contrasts. She seems at once cast in bronze, burnished by relentless sorrow, and made of clay, as she struggles to create a new outlook for her life. A surprising inner strength, which she herself can scarcely recognize, comes from her determination to honor her child. Packard insists that the exhibit is all about Blake and not about her, but it is impossible to separate the son's story from the mother's. Her love brought him

into this world and guided him into his teens. Her painting inspired Blake to explore his own artistic expression; her grief is evolving into his memorial show, which Packard has titled “The Universe.”

“‘The Universe’ — my god, that’s where he went. My therapist, who is very spiritual, said after looking at his work, ‘This boy was needed somewhere fast.’ I want people to see Blake’s work because I find it inspiring. I want to share his vision,” Packard says.

If there is a mold for a typical teenager in today’s world, by choice 16-year-old Blake Van Hoof Packard did not fit it. Shy in groups and a bit of a loner, he was a self-professed “proud atheist” who preferred art classes in school and resisted the more academic side of his education. Splitting his year between Sarasota, Fla., and Provincetown, he was a bright, creative iconoclast. He was obsessed with The Beatles, adored by his large extended family, and destined to make his own mark as part of the Packard artistic legacy — his mother and Aunt Cynthia and his grandmother, Anne Packard, are all well-known artists, and Anne is the daughter of legendary American artist Max Bohm. Blake hoped to attend Ringling College of Art & Design after high school.

Blake’s “Universe” series came to him soon after he arrived from Sarasota for his Provincetown summer.

Using spray paints in vibrant hues of red, purple, green and orange, sometimes offset by somber grays or black, Blake produced in rapid-fire succession roughly 30 paintings over a scant five weeks, from early June to July 14. Using a template for his universe’s basic components, he painted multiple variations of the same essential theme: sun, earth, stars and planets swirling above and around a solid pyramid. His images convey great precision and incredible energy. His seemed to be a world of infinite possibilities and hope. His painting energized him, helped him shake off early summer doldrums and lent sharp focus and excitement to his daily routine.

To view Blake Van Hoof Packard’s art is to witness a marvelous flash of creative talent, energy and cosmic insight.

“It wasn’t until the summer of 2011 that I came [upon] Blake in my sister’s backyard, paper and paint flying everywhere. Then I saw his hands. I knew in an instant that this boy was a true artist, the way his hands moved earnest and sure. I watched as he created universes with planets and pyramids of all shapes and sizes. Then came the stars, his source of light which brought true dimension to these paintings,” says Cynthia Packard, Blake’s aunt and teacher. “I have been a teacher for many years, and I have seen hands move like this only a few times. I knew he was gifted and talented, and to me talent is inspiration, fearlessness and commitment. Blake had all three.”

Blake’s untimely death rattled the soul of the community. In a letter to the Banner in early August, Carolyn Kramer poignantly addressed the young artist lost. “Blake, I will miss you dearly. Every time I look up in the sky and see a kite I will think of you and remember your sweet smile and your beautiful bright eyes,” she wrote. More recently Kramer wrote a quick note to Leslie. “Blake is looking down on us, saying ‘Mom, make sure you tell them that you were my inspiration.’ Because you were. He told me so.”

Despite the grief suffusing her world, Packard reflects quiet courage when speaking about her son.

“His work came like a bolt out of the blue, and then he died. It’s got to mean something. I ‘talk’ to Blake all the time. I walk the dunes every day — that’s the last place I saw Blake alive. Finally, I have just started to get back to my own painting,” she says.

In staging the memorial exhibit, Packard commissioned museum quality prints of the 13 original paintings she still has. The rest have already been given to family members as cherished mementoes of a life lost far too soon.

The public is invited to attend the opening of the exhibit from 7 to 9 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 7, at the Leslie Packard Gallery, 398 Commercial St., Provincetown. Prints of Blake’s work will be available for purchase, with all proceeds going to Golden Willow Retreat.