

By Kathryn Finegan Clark

Isa Kollgaard

A South American woman has turned her childhood passion into a career as a graphic artist in this country.

A Venezuelan, settled now in the Lehigh Valley, Isa Kollgaard has conquered the culture and crashed the language barrier and successfully established her own business.

Married and the mother of two boys, Isa has found a way to convert that passion and experience into a career that pleases her. Her earnings from Isa Kollgaard Artwork allow her to run her business and still be a stay-at-home mother.

She paints murals in children's rooms. In her studio a handsome painted tree spreads its branches in a corner near a window, neatly calling the beauty of the outdoors inside. She says, "Murals can transform a child's room into a magical place."

Isa is a bundle of creative energy—ideas leaping over ideas and fighting for space as more ideas bubble up.

She talks about the joy of creating and actually credits her mother, a psychologist, for "letting me be me when I was a child."

She says, "I always drew and painted. She let me draw on the wall in my room. She sent me to summer arts camps. I did creative

things. I wrote plays. I danced. That's why today, I am able to create. It all comes from someplace that is beyond me."

That child-like energy is still pouring out and climbing nursery walls in the form of whimsical wall art up and down the East Coast.

Isa does all her designing on her computer and then hand-paints the murals on site. She often works on those on weekends when her husband, Kevin, is free to care for their sons.

She just completed a mural in Doylestown, Bucks County, and is finishing up another in a Nazareth home.

Raised in Caracas, she studied graphic design and worked as a graphic designer for both Hilton Venezuela and an insurance company in the city after she graduated from the Villasmil Institute of Design.

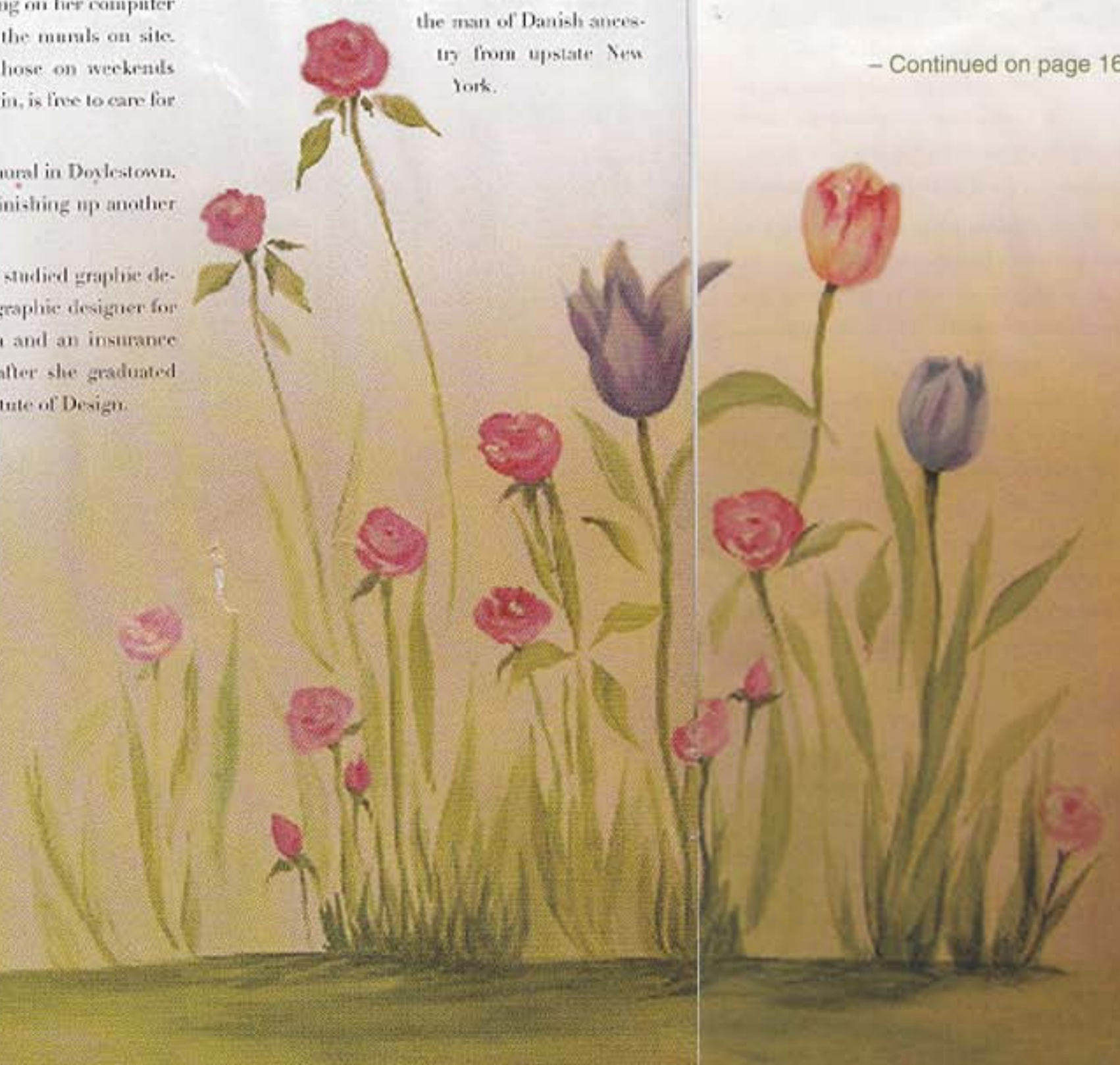
She moved to this country after a cousin who lived in New York told her about a man who would be a perfect husband for her. Reluctant to meet him at first, she changed her mind after she saw his photo. She flew to Manhattan with an "O.K., I'll see what happens" attitude.

What happened is they soon fell in love and were married—the artist from Caracas and the man of Danish ancestry from upstate New York.

Even then, Isa was not without a career plan. She knew she needed American credentials in addition to her Venezuelan education and business experience so she studied graphics at the Parsons School of Design in New York City. She also honed her English skills to near-perfection with only a slight, but completely charming, accent.

The Kollgaards have been married for

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about 10 years and have two sons, Brian, 7, and Adam, 3. The newlyweds lived in Atlanta, for a while, then moved to Florida where Isa free-lanced and took a job as art director at Nova Southeastern University, where she designed and created graphic pieces for medical schools and clinics.

It was in Florida, particularly in Boca Raton, where she started to do wall art for children's rooms. She said she painted a scene in her son's room one day and her mother-in-law, impressed, told her, "You know people would pay you to do this." And people have been paying her ever since.

A job change for Kevin took the family to New Jersey, where they lived in Springfield and Isa continued to paint. After moving to Nazareth, Kevin now has joined the many Route 78 commuters. He works in Mountainside for the U.S. Department of Labor.

As their children grew, Isa participated in arts and crafts fairs and festivals, where she sold small hand-painted items, using her booth as a platform to display her more expensive custom wall art.

That exposure brought her clients and she not only began to do in-home murals but also sold her smaller artwork through children's stores.

She arranges her working hours around her sons' schedules. She creates her designs on the computer in her studio, and always seems to be coming up with new ideas.

Her Web site, www.braveprince.com, shows some examples of her custom murals, ranging from fairy tale castles to safari adventures. The scenes, in homes from New Jersey to Florida, include original murals in schools and businesses. One of her fanciful paintings covers a wall in Sherwoods for Kids in Easton.

A hallmark of her work is her special blending of soft and vibrant acrylics.

The process of creating a mural goes something like this: She meets with a client and they discuss expectations and budget. Together they work up an idea for theme and colors and styles of painting. "It is a thoroughly personal and collaborative creation," Isa says.

She treasures the challenge of meeting the client's expectations and sharing the creative process.

She then goes back to her computer, creates a design and presents it for approval. It can be a true challenge, she says, pointing to photos of nursery furniture sent to her by a client who wants to be sure the mural and furnishings can live happily together. "But that's good," she says, explaining it's important for her design to complement and blend with the furniture and décor.

When Isa receives final approval for a mural, she hand-paints the design at her client's home.

"Decorating your kid's room can play an essential role in developing your child's sense of self and imagination," she says. "Murals give a room instant character and color."

Sometimes she combines a custom canvas as a centerpiece of a design, then extends its theme on the wall outside the canvas. That way, if the family moves, the canvas goes with them. She also paints small wall art pieces that can be personalized and hung in the child's room.

But it's really the murals that capture her heart. They allow you to transport yourself to a different world," she says. That's every artist's dream. ■