

A LIFE FULL OF ART

Scott Ashley is a doctor in a family of artists
— but he's dabbled in many mediums himself

A child grows up among a family of artists in Mississippi, a place — Ocean Springs — where in 1918 his great-grandparents bought 24 acres and his great-grandmother established a community of artists that thrives to this day. His grandmother studied art and absorbed the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement, and often painted with her friend, Impressionist Mary Cassatt. The boy's grandfather and two great-uncles were artists; the family home was full of art; author Eudora Welty was a family friend.

Yet the boy, Scott Ashley, became a doctor and found his way to Astoria, Oregon. It seems a long way from where he grew up, but Ashley doesn't see it that way. "Ocean Springs is the Astoria of the South," he says, "a very artistic community, but a lot hotter."

Ashley's great-uncle Walter Anderson is perhaps the best known of the family artists. Ashley says he was, "an elusive naturalist whose family lovingly supported his talent and also recognized his eccentric temperament." His paintings and the ceramics he designed for the family's Shearwater Pottery company have gained a measure of fame.

Shearwater Pottery was established by Ashley's grandfather, Peter Anderson, whose brother, James McConnell "Mac" Anderson soon joined the firm. Shearwater Pottery continues to produce both art and utilitarian ceramics today. Mac Anderson was also an architect, sculptor, painter and printmaker, and one of Scott Ashley's greatest influences: "He was a gentle, beautiful old man. He loved New Orleans, and he was one of my inspirations to go to Tulane (University)."

Another source of inspiration for Ashley was his father, whom he calls, "a blue-collar, simple guy who married the non-artistic daughter of an artistic family." He spent his working years in a shipyard and is, "the source of my sensibility and work ethic."

When Ashley was in elementary school his family moved in with his grandfather, to nurse him through Lou Gehrig's disease. Ashley first became interested in medicine as he watched the physical therapist work with his grandfather. A friend's father suggested he pursue the interest.

Before entering medical school he taught English for a year in Mexico, and later received a fellowship to go to Guatemala to work on a film documenting the genocide of the Mayan people by the government, in which some 200,000 people died. He stayed on to work with forensic anthropologists, living in a Mayan village where he could see the effects of PTSD on children.

Along the way, Ashley also spent some time

in Mozambique, and the cumulative effect of his experiences was an interest in refugee health. He also met his wife, Christy ("A medical anthropologist who had been with the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic. We hit it off immediately."), and they moved to Denver, Colorado, where he did his residency at a hospital where a third of his patients were political refugees.

"Being from the South," Ashley says, "racism is a part of the vocabulary." But the South is where he also learned the importance of diversity. "I've been in New Orleans, enjoying music with the rich and the poor, the black and the white, and it's art that holds the scene together."

After his residency, Dr. Ashley and his wife decided that they had been away from large bodies of water for too long, and took a road trip to the Northwest. They passed through Astoria and decided they'd like to live here for four years. It's been twice that now, and there are no plans to move. Ashley works at Wimahl Family Clinic in Astoria.

Art is still an important part of his life. In the house he shares with Christy and their children, George and Ada, the cupboards hold Shearwater ceramics and the walls display works by family and friends. He's had little training, he says, "but a lot of exposure to different mediums." He attended the recent Maori pottery workshop at Clatsop Community College, "and I dabble in printmaking, charcoal and watercolor." He's worked on murals and taught himself to sew in order to make costumes, "and I'd like to hook a rug."

If he had the time, "mixed-media sculpture would be my greatest interest," Ashley says. The doctor has a talent for writing as well, to judge by a story he wrote for the 2014 RAIN Magazine about the loss of the family home and much of the family art in Hurricane Katrina.

Time is a problem though. There are two kids to raise, and, "being a doctor is a pretty exhausting thing, dealing with both physical and emotional suffering. At the end of the day there's not a whole lot left," he says.

You might think that a doctor who has been exposed to the misery of genocide and the loss of much that has been important to him and his family would have a dour take on life. You'd be wrong. "I've heard a lot of people talking about how bad the world is," he says. "My take on it is that we are a country hooked on instantly available information, information that says the world is a bad place. We need to be a lot more optimistic for our kids."



Ceramics from the family's firm, Shearwater Pottery, line a cupboard at Scott Ashley's home in Astoria.



Scott Ashley, right, and his son, George, with hold a pot by made by Ashley's grandfather, Peter Anderson.

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A detail of a pot by Walter Anderson, Scott Ashley's great-uncle.

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