

Creating a New Life in a New Town

by Joyce Wilburn

Two years ago, Gretha (Mike) Blake began searching for a retirement community in her hometown of Leesburg, one of Virginia's fastest growing areas. Instead of moving into one of the numerous large retirement centers in bustling Northern Virginia, she chose to relocate to Danville's Stratford House, a small community of 50 independent-living apartments and 30 assisted-living units.

Mike knew no one in Danville at the time, but that didn't deter her. "I make friends easily," she explains flashing her own winning smile. On the initial tour of Stratford House, she asked if there was an art room where she could sculpt. The affirmative answer clinched Mike's relocation deal. "I'm in pig heaven here," says the sculptor with a soft chuckle.

After moving in, Mike put her distinctive mark on Stratford House. One of her sculptures is on exhibit in the lobby of the main building, while others are on display in her beautifully decorated apartment overlooking the 43-acre campus of the former Stratford College. And soon there will be more. Mike is enrolling in the spring sculpturing classes taught by Averett University's Diane Kendrick. "Mike is very interesting and self-motivated. I believe in life-long learning for traditional and adult students. I'm happy to work with her," Kendrick says.

The journey to being a sculptor didn't start as early as Mike wished, though. As a child, she asked her father, an architect, about sculpturing. He discouraged her, saying there were too many tools involved. While she didn't pursue her dream, she never forgot it. "About 10 years ago," she says, "I read about classes in Leesburg and took a drawing class and then a sculpturing class. I took for a year and stopped when my husband became ill." But once at



Stratford House she resumed her sculpturing. "I used the trial-and-error method and learned from books. It's fun and good for the arthritis in my hands." Plus, Mike is equally delighted to be learning more about her avocation.

"There is nothing like the feeling you get when you create something," she says explaining how her work evolves slowly into a finished product. "It comes to life as you work on it," she explains. Because every new life needs identification, Mike names each sculpture. In her apartment are "Dude," "Cyrus," "Aunt Effie," and one recently finished sculpture yet to be named.

All in all, Mike feels her new home in her new city has been a perfect fit. This mother of 5 adult children, grandmother of 9, and great-grandmother of 6 says, "I was overwhelmed by the size of the retirement communities in Northern Virginia. Here, I have privacy and I can communicate with other people when I want to. The people are great, and I feel safe and secure." Mike also enjoys the cultural activities in the community and thinks Danville is a beautiful community, adding, "I love seeing the old Victorian homes here."

"This is just perfect for me," she says with satisfaction, sitting in her living room surrounded by her creations. The nice part of that statement? She could be referring to her hobby, her new home, and her new hometown.

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