



PENINSULA

Carolyn Watts

Artist, traveler

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Carolyn Watts of Port Townsend, right, shops at the outdoor market in Marrakech with her cook and friend, Nezha.



JENNIFER WILSON

LIVING a spiced life

Painter connects PT to Marrakech

BY DIANE URBANI DE LA PAZ
FOR PENINSULA WOMAN

PORT TOWNSEND — Artist Carolyn Watts walked into another world with her heart open.

Ever since, her heart has expanded, along with her cooking skills.

Watts, then a clinical laboratory scientist at Seattle's Providence Medical Center, decided to follow her heart 17 years ago by enrolling in Seattle's Cornish College of the Arts. She graduated magna cum laude, a sculptor and painter with an

appetite for crossing borders.

So when a Seattle friend, Jim Egbert, asked Watts in 2007 to paint a mural at his second home in Marrakech, the Moroccan city of 1.07 million, she gathered her paintbrushes and flew off to North Africa.

While working there, she got to know Hakima, an expert cook who helped her with everything: shopping for groceries, cooking, holding her ladder steady while she painted.

TURN TO WATTS/4

Watts: Helped her friend learn to speak, read, write French

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Watts asked Hakima what she hoped for in life and was surprised to hear that she was illiterate and wanted to learn to read and write French, Morocco's unofficial third language after classical Arabic and Berber.

It cost \$30 a month to attend a language school; Watts gave Hakima \$100. Today, she speaks, reads and writes French, and has more recently begun learning English.

Watts wanted to do more for the women she had come to know in Marrakech. A friend suggested she teach art classes there, but that didn't seem right.

Started cooking school

So in fall 2007, Watts and Hakima established Hakima's Cooking School and put the word out back home that she had rented a riad, a large house with a courtyard, where participants could stay while exploring the flavors of Morocco.

"The food is fabulous, spicy and fresh," says Watts, who next month will host her eighth session of Hakima's Cooking School. "Everything we eat, we buy that day," at the souk, the open-air marketplace.

Recipes are handed down orally, generation to generation, and good cooks learn too that their moods influ-

ence the taste of their dishes. If you're unhappy, for instance, the dinner you make can turn out too salty.

This spring's cooking school starts March 20, and for the first time includes yoga classes taught by Watts' fellow Port Townsener, Ilana Smith. The owner of the Room to Move yoga studio at 1008 Lawrence St. will teach twice daily at the house in Marrakech: an active session in the morning and a meditative one just before dinner. For Smith, who has taught all over the world, yoga is a kind of home for body and spirit. Practicing while on vacation, she says, is a way to "take our home with us."

The weeklong retreat also includes all meals, lodging and Moroccan cooking instruction three days a week for the evening meal for \$1,650. Watts and Smith will direct a portion of the proceeds to a fund for literacy education, to help women attend school or take lessons with a tutor.

Last-minute reservations

For the retreat, "we are taking reservations up until the last minute," Smith said.

She encourages would-be travelers to phone her at 360-385-2864 or e-mail info@roomtomoveyoga.com. Another session of Hakima's Cooking School will be offered in the fall, after Watts returns to Marrakech in September.



Port Townsend's Carolyn Watts, left, Catharine Robinson and Jennifer Wilson, right, enjoy a day in and around Marrakech with their guide, Mokhtar. The women attended Hakima's Cooking School in Marrakech, which has another session open to students from the North Olympic Peninsula in March.

She urges students to take the cooking classes and then go traveling around the medina — the old city — as well as around the adjacent modern parts of Marrakech. And then there's the countryside, which includes the Sahara Desert.

Watts, for her part, has never been much of a tourist. She is an explorer, a walker, a woman who smiles at passers-by, then bows her head and places a hand over her heart.

And that, she says, has made the difference. Hakima is only one of the many friends she's made.

There is also Nezha, the cook who invited her to a family wedding outside the city. It was an unforgettable party, with festivities that began at 8 p.m. and went on till 5 a.m. As soon as Watts got up and danced with the celebrants, "all of the barriers came down," she remembers.

Welcomed into family

Nezha's family "kind of adopted me," Watts says, after she took Nezha's brother Morad, who suffers from a heart ailment, to the doctor. He was painfully thin when they met. Helping him get medical attention was "just what I do," she says.

Morad's health improved, and Watts has asked him to be her photographer while she's in Marrakech every spring and fall. She leaves her camera with him; he takes photos of the cooking school participants from Port Townsend, of Watts and of her Moroccan friends — and family members, including her honorary daughter, Amal. They met soon after Amal, who has a master's in business administration and speaks five languages, had lost her

mother to cancer.

There's also Jalil Tounsi, Watts' translator, and his wife Seloua. They chose Watts as godmother to their baby girl, Raghad Grace; she is named after Watts' grandmother Grace Heryford.

To this woman's mind, differences in language and culture need not be barriers between people. Watts carries a Lonely Planet Arabic phrasebook, and speaks some French.

And "I'm not afraid to make mistakes," she says.

Ready for adventure

"When I'm invited to go somewhere, I go," adds Watts. She has traveled far outside the city of Marrakech, to see the desert, to meet the families of her friends and to enjoy lavish meals with them. She has experienced Berber pizza, transportation by camel and Moroccan ice cream served every season by the man known as Mr. Smile.

Watts' adventuresome spirit stems, she says, from a decision she made a



Carolyn Watts of Port Townsend, left, takes a moment for a break with her friend, Zarah, of Marrakech.

long time back. It was the 1960s, she was a lab scientist, and she had an opportunity to travel with a public health team to Kabul, Afghanistan. But she didn't go.

"I quit and got married . . . and that is the only thing in my life that I regret," Watts says.

She does not, however, regret the daughter, Morgan, that she parented with her first husband; she is grown up and living in Seattle now.

And Watts has been happily married to her second husband, John Watts, for 31 years. He has gone with her to Morocco, but not every time, since his work as Port Townsend's city attorney keeps him busy at home almost all of the time.

Dreams of skills center

Watts' dream is to have a language and jobs skills center that would be open to the working-class people of Marrakech. Until that dream comes true, she will keep returning, each fall and spring, to see friends old and new and to invite people from Port Townsend and the North Olympic Peninsula to Hakima's cooking school.

Clearly, connecting with people — wherever they are — is easy for Watts. When asked what shaped her into a woman who so naturally reaches out, she answers quickly.

"My hometown was 600 people," she says. Growing up in Cedarville, in Modoc County, Calif., taught her to look everyone in the eye, to see everybody, regardless of their station.

Returning to Marrakech year after year has enabled her to make a difference in the lives of the women she works with — "and they in mine," she adds.

"My life," says Watts, "has never been better than now."



SCOTT WILSON (3)

Carolyn Watts of Port Townsend will soon travel to Marrakech, Morocco, to reunite with friends including Zarah, left.