



ordinary people

METKA SKROBAR, 63, ARTIST, GOLD COAST

Every month for the past ten years, I've travelled to the Queensland Outback to teach women how to paint. It's not unusual for my students to go out on horseback or motorbike in the morning to check all the waterholes on their property, or go mustering before they pack their lunch and come to a 9am painting class in Emerald, Tambo, Blackall or Roma.

I have a joyful relationship with all my students. I tell them: "Don't paint pretty pictures, paint your life." For them, time is so limited so they are free and liberal [during class]; their expression just flows onto the canvas. The colours of the Outback are mind-blowing, but it's the spirit of the individuals who live there that inspires me as an artist – they are such resilient, special, non-whingeing people. It could be the driest drought and animals could be dying, but no-one complains because they still have hope it might rain tomorrow. It also humbles me to see what talent and passion there is within people. Often it just needs to be gently brought out.

I identify with that nurturing process because of my own background. My parents and my brother and I lived in Slovenia [in eastern Europe] but under the former communist regime there were a lot of constraints, so you couldn't speak your mind. We

fled to Austria and then emigrated to Australia. My father was an electrical engineer and my mother a seamstress, so we were offered free passage. My parents were so devoted to creating a better life for us that they worked up to three shifts every day. We didn't speak English when we arrived.

Drawing was the only thing I could do really well in the beginning. My work was taken into school competitions and art shows. Having caring teachers made a huge difference so mentoring, for me, is like giving back. Later I became a primary school teacher and took on art full-time in my early thirties. I've since had 24 solo exhibitions here and overseas. Pieces have sold for more than I could ever have imagined. People say, "You are so talented!" but I've been doing it for 30 years, often for seven hours a day. In the hardest of times, I never gave up.

I was married for 20 years [to the father of my three adult children, daughter Simon, 39, and sons Christopher, 36, and Julian, 34]. We divorced when I was 42. There was no malice, but we hardly spoke until suddenly, two years ago, we fell in love again and decided to be together for however long we have left. We couldn't be happier; it's probably the best time of our lives.

AMANDA WATT

See Metka Skrobar at couriermail.com.au/ordinarypeople