Fond memories of artist

He was my all-time hero: grandson says of John Allukpik

by Michele LeTourneau
Northern News Services
Kugluktuk/Coppermine

When 80-year-old painter John Allukpik died April 4, the community of Kugluktuk lost a cherished elder, but his legacy remains through people and through his paintings.

Irene Allukpik, his daughter, says he grew up on the land, although she and her four sisters and two brothers grew up mostly in Kugluktuk.

"He was a really outgoing person, always keeping positive," she says. "He was always busy with his painting."

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It was while stricken with tuberculosis that Irene thinks her dad learned how to paint with oils. In a short interview with *Nunavut News/North* in 2007, John said he learned how to paint in 1953.

He stopped painting for about 20 years, but picked it up again and remained an avid artist, creating about seven paintings each month. His work ranged in size from 16-inch by 20-inch paintings to 24-inch by 30-inch paintings.

John was in a wheelchair and it's from there that he painted his largest project in 2009, likely the largest mural in Nunavut at the time. His wife Lena and a young visual artist named Chantal Dupas, completing her final year of a fine arts degree in Winnipeg, assisted. His beloved wife Lena, a carver, died on Dec. 3, 2011.

Dupas spent June of that year with John, helping out with the 35-foot by eight-foot mural located inside the Milukshuk Centre owned by the Kugluktuk Radio Society (KRS).

"The time I spent with him was very special. He was a very quiet man, very calm and relaxed," said Dupas from New York City.

"I was finishing up school and he was definitely the best medicine. In school you're constantly analyzing every little bit – What does this mean? Why did you choose this medium? Why this subject matter? – It was very refreshing to meet someone who paints what he loves and he trusts it. He brought that love for painting that was kind of fading for me."

Mike Webster of the radio society remembers visitors passing through.

"I loved how people would come into KRS and watch quietly as he painted, it was amazing – like some sacred ceremony," says Webster.

John told stories as he painted.

"He taught me a lot about Inuit traditional life, too," says Dupas, who remains a practising artist.

"He taught me not to take myself too seriously. He was a very kind and generous man."

Irene explains John mostly painted winter scenes, with iglus and dog teams.

"And in the summer, tents made out of caribou skin out on the beautiful land."

In later years, John painted from memory, letting his knowledge of life on the land guide his hand to paint scenes of traditional life. What Irene holds most dear is how her dad affected her. "

He was a really big inspiration to me. When I was young I ended up going into art, learning how from my dad, watching him growing up. We would go out on the land – go to an island or out on the land – and he would paint stuff," she said.

"We'd stay there for hours, until he was done."

John was also an inspiration to his grandsons.

Nigel Allukpik, one grandson, says, "He was my all-time hero."

"He was always there for us. He was the best painter."

The day John died, the community was hosting a square dance showdown. Often a death in a community might mean activities are suspended.

But, in this case, the family said the dancing must continue because John would have wanted everyone to go forward and not stop what they were doing.

"I just want to say that he was a really big inspiration and I'm glad that he was my father," says Irene. "I loved him very much, with all my heart."

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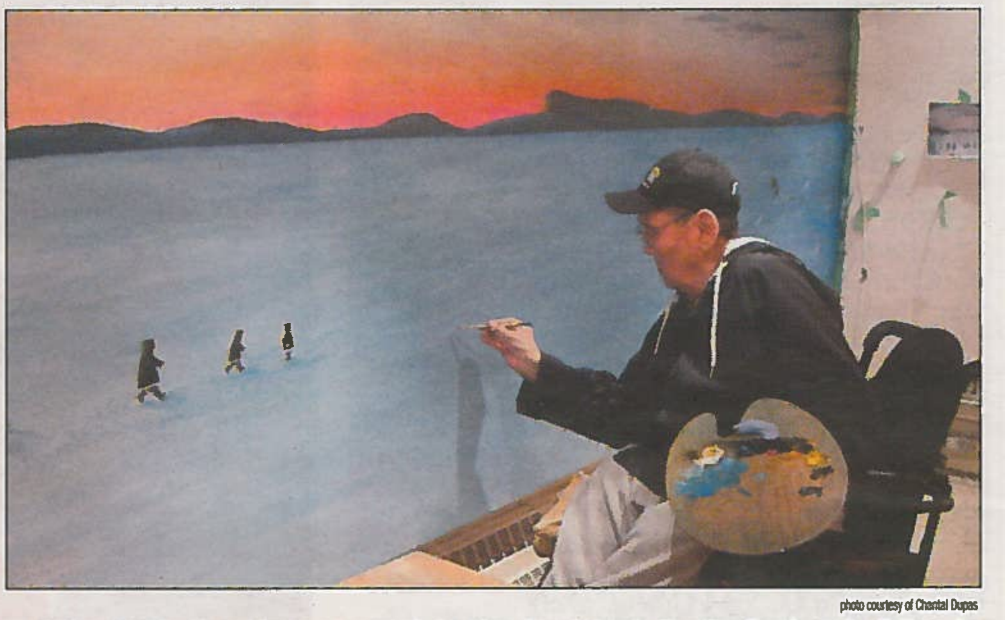

photo courtesy of Chantal Dupas

***John Allukpik paints a mural** in the Kugluktuk Radio Society building in Kugluktuk in 2009. The mural interacts with the station's theatrical lighting to give an effect of changing times of the day and even the changing seasons.*

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David Ho/DnV photo

***Elder John Allukpik of Kugluktuk** is remembered with great love by friends and family alike after his death April 4.*

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