

At 67, Lauren McNamara has embarked on a new career and sheâ??s charming customers at a downtown hotspot.

Description

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Lauren McNamara makes sure to remember where the regular clientele at Samâ??s Grill like to sit. She Googles them to learn their interests so she can â??engage in good conversation.â?• Thatâ??s just a sample of the people skills sheâ??s employed over a long career in the competitive world of merchandising, sales, and interior design.

Sheâ??s working part-time as a maÃ®tre dâ?? â?? an experiment with retirement â?? at the popular Financial District restaurant owned by a relative. â??Iâ??m so close to my cousin and I have such a good time with the staff,â?• she said. She aims for a professional camaraderie with customers but couldnâ??t help herself, she said, when the restaurant hosted Willie Brownâ??s 90th birthday party recently. â??I thanked Nancy Pelosi for what sheâ??s done for women and the country.â?•

McNamaraâ??s career depended on both artistic and emotional sensibilities. â??I loved building personal relationships, and when I worked in interior design, I had the same clients for 25 to 30 years,â?• she said. As a board member of NEWH, an industry networking group, she built lifelong friendships with the Bay Area designers whose coffee table books are scattered across her Twin Peaks condominium**.**

Immersed in the art of watercolor

She hasnâ??t yet decided whether sheâ??ll go back into interior design, but sheâ??s still deeply invested in her personal art. Sheâ??s long been immersed in watercolor painting, studying for the past 30 years with the same teacher.

Every wall of her home is graced with scenes of beaches, palm trees, hotels, and house facades. Watercolor is her favorite medium â??because you can do it anywhere,â?• she said, glancing at several postcard-sized landscapes that illustrate her sitting with â??a Mai-Tai on one of my favorite beaches, Waikiki, Hawaii.â?•



Lauren McNamaraâ??s displays her painting of a palm tree in Calistoga. (Photos by Colin Campbell.)

McNamara does most of her painting in a weekly class in Marin. The three-hour sessions, she said, allow her to experiment with new techniques. â??I found a talent in myself that makes me so happy,â?• she said, adding that it â??makes me look at everything differently, judging if it will be the subject of my next painting.â?•

She discovered her drawing skills in a junior high art class in Chicago, where in 1971 her father, a mechanical engineer, had accepted a two-year job transfer. Afterward, the family returned to San Jose, where McNamara and her brother were born and raised.

â??In that art class we had to draw a portrait, full-face, and right and left profiles and no one could do it except me,â?• she said. â??I knew I could draw, but this was an epiphany that I could draw that well.â?•

A youthful passion leads to a career

Sewing was another youthful passion, one that opened the door to her future career. â??My mother sewed some of her own clothes, and I really wanted to learn,â?• she said. Before long, McNamara and

a friend were making clothes for their Barbie dolls and skirts for themselves. They wore them to school â??and everyone laughed at us.â?•

Undeterred by the teasing, she went on to earn a bachelorâ??s degree in consumer textiles at the University of California, Davis. She also took classes in fashion and business. Fashion illustration was one of her favorites.

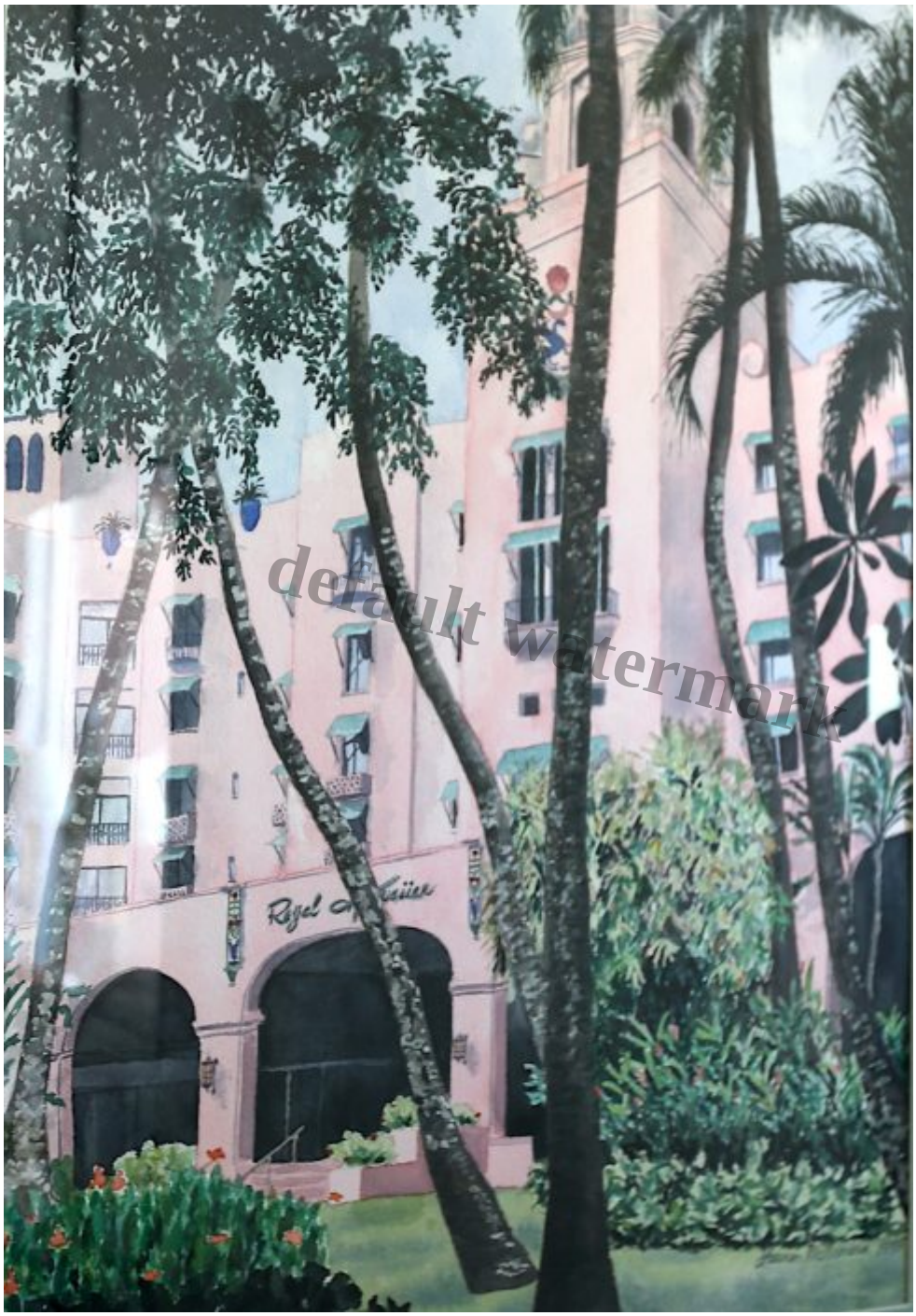


Lauren McNamara checking out color samples sheâ??ll be using as she paints.

â??The teacher taught us how to draw stylized models with long legs and create storyboards for movies with different characters. It was a lot of fun.â?• She mastered pattern design and created clothes, including a dress a la Gunne Sax, designs reminiscent of popular late 19th-century fashion with laces, puffed, leg-o-mutton sleeves and calico, lace and gingham fabrics.

In 1979, while looking for work, McNamara paused for a Hawaii vacation with her mother. Spotting a job in the Honolulu classifieds for an assistant buyer for a high-end department and specialty store chain, she applied and got the job.

Hawaii was a congenial home for McNamara. The job instilled a work ethic and rigorousness that served her well in the world of interior design, she said, where millions were being spent and mistakes could be career-killing. She admired what she called Hawaiiâ??s â??solid, reliableâ?• culture and bonded with a local family whose granddaughters she keeps in touch with. Theyâ??re much like the daughters she never had, she said.



McNamaraâ??s painting of iconic Honolulu hotel.

After five years, she moved to San Francisco to manage a chain of womenâ??s apparel stores. She later jointed the Gap then Banana Republic as a womenâ??s clothing store merchandiser.

Creating a model store

Part of her job at Banana Republic was setting up the first example of the store model the company developed for each season. At the Hillsdale outlet, the closest in size and shape to most, McNamara and her colleagues would set up the new fashions in a â??mock storeâ?• that would be photographed

and distributed throughout the chain.

â??We would work all night when the store was closed,â?• McNamara said. â??It was always fun to do â??the big revealâ?? in the morning.â?•

The fashion industry was â??go, go, fast-paced and thatâ??s why I loved it,â?• she said. Fashion has four to six seasons a year, so â??there was always something new to work on, whether developing designs in the buying offices or merchandising the goods in the stores.â?•

By 1999, McNamara switched to interior design, something sheâ??d been interested in since college. She held a series of jobs in San Francisco â?? including 14 years at Restoration Hardware â?? helping designers and architects develop interiors for hotels, restaurants, offices, and public spaces.

â??The more you knew, the more organized you were, the more you instilled confidence in the client, the more they shopped with you,â?• said McNamara, who sold indoor and outdoor furniture, rugs, bathroom fixtures, art, lighting, and drapery.

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Joining the San Francisco social whirl

She also loved the social whirl of the design community, especially the gala parties for the San Francisco Decorator Showcase House and the Fall Show at Fort Mason. â??Itâ??s a small world, you get to know everyone,â?• she said.

It was a whirl she could accommodate, having never married or had children. She was close to her brother and saw him periodically throughout his life; he died in 2020. Mark McNamara was a professional basketball player between 1982 and 1993, starting with the Philadelphia 76ers. He played with other NBA teams, as well as several professional European ball teams.

His sister went to many of his high school games, at Del Mar in San Jose, but only a few of his college and pro games. She was living in Hawaii most of that time.

â??The games I did go to, especially the Lakers games in L.A. (1988-1990) were the most fun. It was during their biggest â??Showtimeâ?• years with Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul Jabbar,â?• said McNamara. â??The Hollywood scene at the games was also amazing. Jack Nicholson, Michael Douglas, and Bill Murray were always there.â?•



Inspired during a trip to Italy, McNamara painted this scene.

She went to Italy when he was playing on a pro team in Livorno, near Florence. â??We went to one game there, and the basketball court was surrounded by glass like a hockey rink since the fans were so crazy,â• she recalled. â??My friends and I had to stand up on the top row with all the old men who were smoking at the game. Once they realized Mark was my brother, they stopped giving us the stink eye. He was the big star of the team.â•

After her brother retired to Alaska, where he coached a high school team, she saw him a half dozen times a year at their motherâ??s home in Pacifica. He would come for extended stays. McNamara spent nearly every weekend there, caring for her mother from 1999 when she was badly injured in a car accident until her death in 2018.

Lending a hand

Caregiving had entered her world in her 50s when her cousin suddenly died. She ended up raising her 16-year-old son. They were responsibilities from which she never wavered and never complained.

When a 90-year-old man, the oldest in her weekly art class in Marin, could no longer drive, it was perhaps natural that she raised her hand to help. Sheâ??s been giving him a ride from his home in Japantown ever since.

â??Everyone in the class wanted him to keep coming,â?• said McNamara, who at 67 is the classâ??s youngest. â??Weâ??ve all been together for so long.â?•

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1. All Posts

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