

Same old story, but just as poignant

Artists may have to leave town

By Jarie Stedman

It is ironic that as the Provincetown Art Association and Museum celebrates its 75th Anniversary and the Fine Arts Work Center dedicates new artist studio space, many artists are being forced to leave town due to the high cost of living.

This is not a new story.

Leo Manso, who along with Victor Candell ran an art school in what is now Long Point Gallery, closed the school in 1976 because, as Manso put it, "Provincetown got too expensive for young students to live here."

But the story has lost none of its poignancy.

Artist Jim Peters is a case in point. In 1982, Peters was awarded a fellowship to the Fine Arts Work Center. He moved here with his wife, Vicky Tomayko. A year later they were joined by his daughter, Ingrid. Son Arvid was born three years later.

Peters and Tomayko stayed in Provincetown because, quite simply, they loved the town. But they've paid the price. Peters figures it has cost him \$30,000 a year for his family to live in Provincetown.

Last year, he could not have met his expenses without the \$9,500 grant he was awarded by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities.

With proposals to cut the council's budget almost by half, awards such as Peters' may have all but disappeared.

One reason Peters struggled to stay in Provincetown is he wanted to see his daughter complete high school here. This year Ingrid graduated valedictorian of

her senior class.

Peters has nothing but praise for the high school, which he describes as a special place, preparing its students for the real world. He and Vicky are also pleased with the day care center their son attends.

But in September the family is moving to Middlefield, N.Y., where they purchased a couple of acres with farm house and barn for \$60,000. In Provincetown, they were paying over \$12,000 a year in rents for one studio space and the first floor of a house on Carver Street.

Tomayko, herself an artist, was working from the bedroom at home. When Peters's older daughter, Heather, would visit, she stayed in his studio.

Although Peters pointed out that economics are not the only reason the family is leaving, he said that if they could afford to live in Provincetown, they would.

Which is the story of so many artists.

Sculptor Paul Bowen searched for months for studio space. At any price. There is practically none. Artists have traditionally worked in industrial spaces, taking over warehouses and barns to accommodate their sculptures and canvases. Provincetown has very little of this type of space.

Several years ago George Bryant proposed turning the old concrete building on MacMillan Pier into artists space. Artist Harvey Dodd rendered a drawing for the proposed studios. Instead, the building was demolished.

A group of artists formed a coalition some years ago and brought a proposal for affordable housing to Town Meeting.

The vote failed to allow the group to buy town-owned property on Harry Kemp Way.

Consequently, many artists are leaving town. Bowen said if he had to pay a rent equivalent to what most people pay, he could not afford to stay in town. For many years, Bowen has lived in a large, one-room studio with his wife, Elise, and their daughter, Megan.

After losing his lease at the Fine Arts Work Center, due to the center's renovations of the building, Bowen finally found studio space in the former Paige bus barn on Pleasant Street, owned by Ghee and Bobby Patrick.

"I want to stay here," Bowen said. "I love Provincetown. Still, I live with the specter of having to leave."

Artist Hilda Neily has been without a studio for six years. She pays rent on a house and cannot afford the extra rent for a studio. Neily also pointed out that with recent studies on the toxicity of paints and turpentine, it isn't healthy for artists to live and work in one space.

The solution? Many artists are thinking about leaving, she said.

But, part of the history of the town is that it is an artists community. Yet tourism has overwhelmed the town's focus.

"Being a tourist town has turned Provincetown into a prostitute," said restaurateur and gallery owner, Napi Van Dereck. "We keep selling availability instead of considering the quality of life here."

Several years ago, Van Dereck studied the possibility of building artists studios. "Call it light industry," he said.

He looked at several parcels of land, none at bargain prices, and speculated on building a three-story industrial complex with 25 to 30 bare bones studios. Each would be approximately 25 feet by 30 feet, with seven-foot ceilings, a sprinkler system, electrical outlets, insulation and rents of \$400 a month. If shared by two artists, one space would be affordable to many.

The spaces could be used for everything from light carpentry to dance studios, said Van Dereck. In addition, Van Dereck felt he could make money on the venture.

But Van Dereck pondered the insurmountable barriers in acquiring variances and special permits for the project. "Something is wrong at the core of the town," he said. "The community has no gut feeling for who we want to be or where we want to go."

Without support, Van Dereck's proposals remained just that.

Perhaps there is no solution, which is what Jim Peters says. He waxes philosophical about leaving. "There's something exciting about being on the edge, physically and mentally. Which doesn't mean you have to leave Provincetown. Still, you need to keep challenging yourself and your work."

A little bit of paradise may be all that many artists can afford. But there is little question that as the sky lightens from turquoise to aqua to peach to persimmon and the curve of the Point stands in stark relief that Provincetown is just that, a bit of paradise.

But now those who love it must tend to its keeping.