



## Gifted painter discovered talent after vision loss

"I want each flower or composition to have motion and emotion," says artist Suzanne Gardner.

For Suzanne, seeing is an art in itself: She is legally blind.

Suzanne started to lose her vision in 1999, as a complication of diabetes. Blood vessels began leaking into the fluid inside her eyes, causing her vision to cloud.

"I was shattered," she recalls. "I lost my independence, I couldn't work, I couldn't drive—all of a sudden everything about how I defined myself had changed."

Suzanne came to Dr. Rob Devenyi, ophthalmologist-in-chief at Toronto Western Hospital, for help. He performed a procedure called a vitrectomy to stabilize the condition. Ultimately, she lost all vision in her right eye, but repeated surgeries helped preserve partial vision in her left eye.

Suzanne also relied on the support of her doctors, including Dr. Gary Rodin, who provides psychosocial support to patients and is the head of Psychosocial Oncology and Palliative Care at Princess Margaret Hospital. Dr. Rodin helped Suzanne understand her condition—and cope with its impact on her life.

"You kind of need to be taken care of—physically, and mentally," she explains. "You need to know how to make a new life."

Part of that new life was painting. "The first time someone suggested I try painting, I thought they were crazy," says Suzanne, who had been used to working in a fast-paced office and had little time to devote to her pastime. Remarkably, when she lost her sight painting became a focal point for her recovery. "It was something to focus on, and I developed a real passion for it."



*Mystic Rose*, by Suzanne Gardner

The limits of her vision have opened creative possibilities for her work—she chooses colours that are vibrant and alive, and focuses on capturing motion, emotion and movement,

using acrylic or oil on large canvases. Flowers, landscapes and nature, including animals, are her subjects. "There's not really a specific inspiration—it's an emotion that I want to convey to the viewer."

What began as a personal pursuit gradually grew into something more, as more and more people saw Suzanne's paintings. In March, her work was exhibited at the Toronto Art Expo, a juried exhibition featuring 300 of the best of Canadian and international artists.

She describes her life now as more fulfilling than ever, and credits the support of Drs. Devenyi and Rodin and others for helping her regain her sense of hope.

"They helped me identify myself differently. You kind of get used to thinking of yourself in one way, and when something so dramatic changes in your life, you have to find a new identity," says Suzanne. In the art of seeing, seeing oneself is an art, too.

Kim Garwood

For information about Suzanne's paintings, go to [www.suzannegardner.com](http://www.suzannegardner.com)