



Photo by Laura Mueller

Kars artist Shelley Leach poses with 'Alligator Point,' one of seven paintings in her Dumoine River series.

## Kars artist paints to save river

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Kars-based artist Shelley Leach was 14 years old when her painter mother packed up her steel-toed boots and oil paints and headed to the arctic. Now, Leach has embarked on her own artistic adventure: one that she hopes will draw attention to a campaign to protect a Quebec river.

Leach's journey began in 2008, when she headed to a friend's remote fishing camp on the Dumoine River, near La Vérendrye Wildlife Reserve. While she left home anticipating a relaxing vacation in the bush with friends, the rugged landscape made an impact on her.

"You walk in, and it's just wilderness," she said. "It just takes your breath away."

When she returned, she picked up her brushes – and hasn't looked back since.

"I'm doing it almost like a personal mission," she said. "It might take me 10 years. It might take me a lifetime."

So far, Leach, 40, has spent a total of about six weeks travelling the northern portion of the river, mainly by motorboat and canoe. In three trips, she has traversed about 20 kilometers of the 129-km river.

She sees her paintings as the embodiment of a unique experience and a geographical record, rather than simply a piece of art in its own right. She will be heading back to Quebec for her first winter trip in March, because she hopes to capture the river's landscape during every season.

In 2008, the Quebec Minister of Sustainable Development, Environment and Parks announced interim protection for about a third of the Dumoine River watershed. After starting her series, Leach learned that the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) had been campaigning for the river's protection since about 2003 and decided to pitch a partnership to the group. She is invited to display her paintings at CPAWS events in the area and she donated 15 per cent from the sales of paintings from the series to the cause. So far, Leach has donated \$460 to CPAWS.

One of those opportunities led to the experience of a lifetime for Leach last week when she was invited to display

her paintings at the Museum of Nature for the Dare to be Deep event hosted by CPAWS as part of a nationwide tour.

The gala event featured traditional cultural performances from the Haida First Nation to celebrate the creation of Canada's first deep sea National Marine Conservation Area in British Columbia's Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve waters – formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands. Leach's paintings formed the backdrop for the event, which also included talks from scientists and conservationists.

"It was the most amazing experience I've ever had in my life," she said. "I would have never dreamed, three years later, that I would be hauling my art into the Museum of Nature with Haida First Nations dancers performing in front of my paintings."

### MOM'S INFLUENCE

The Dumoine River project has really opened Leach's eyes to the influence her mother's artistic career had on her own life and her work as an artist.

Pilfering her mother's paints was Leach's first artistic experience when she was seven or eight years old. She has always painted on the side, but gave up her career as a technician at Ottawa hospitals in 2007 to paint full-time.

Being married to a lifelong military man, Leach's mother, Mary Louise, had a particular insight into the moments that define life for military families, and she was commissioned to travel to Canada's far north to document that lifestyle. Mary Louise Leach passed away seven years ago at age 57 due to cancer.

"It was really inspiring," said Leach, who was 14 at the time. "I don't think I realized that until I was much older," Leach said. "It just took guts."

Leach's Dumoine trip is emulating her mother's journey in the sense that adventure can lead to great art, but the younger Leach wants to blaze her own trail.

"I didn't want to follow in my mom's footsteps literally. I wanted my own adventure," Leach said. "Dumoine is the first step in my adventure."

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