

# Felicia Robinson never let cerebral palsy stop her from expressing herself through art and advocacy

By Brian Howe



by Felicia Robinson

*The Water Wheel*

It's hard enough to get a show on the Durham circuit when you can physically access all of the galleries. But that's just one more obstacle Felicia Robinson has overcome in her 60-year journey to her first solo

exhibit, ***NO LIMITS***, on view at **SPECTRE Arts**.

Robinson was born with cerebral palsy, a permanent movement disorder. Unable to use her hands, she paints, draws and writes by holding implements in her teeth. It's apt that she channels her art through her mouth. It serves as an expressive stand-in for her speech, which is slurred and difficult for anyone outside her family to understand. Though I spoke with Robinson at length—she is articulate, good-humored and patient—you will see few direct quotes from her here because of this challenge. Luckily, three of her nine siblings, along with Carrack Modern Art director Laura Ritchie, are also gathered in the gallery on opening day to help me understand. I get better at it as I key in on her constant themes of family, God and independence.

It's unusual for the Carrack to book a show outside of its own Parrish Street loft, but Robinson's application underscored accessibility issues that are not uncommon in Triangle galleries. The Carrack's steep stairs aren't suitable for wheelchairs. **SPECTRE Arts**, a low white cube near Golden Belt with ramps to the street, fit the bill.

"Y'all were pretty insistent we could get her up the stairs, and you actually did one day," Ritchie says to the group, everyone laughing. "But it was very clear that it would be better for Felicia and the community of artists with disabilities, who I think will greatly benefit from this show, to have access to it."

Though Robinson has been painting and writing poetry (influenced by the likes of Langston Hughes) all her life, most of the work in the show is more recent, as many of her older pieces were lost in a storage-shed fire in 2013. The show represents her triumphant return to painting after the death of her mother, to whom the show is dedicated, in 2010.

"My mother always told me, 'Don't say can't,'" Robinson says, a motto the whole family has adopted and often recites. Living it to the letter, she has built an independent life of art and advocacy, though all of it has gotten more difficult with time.

*Don't be afraid of what you see,*

*Because this chair with wheels is not really me!*

*It just helps to enter life in a casual way.*

*—from "Touch" by Felicia Robinson*

The paintings in *NO LIMITS* are bright, cheerful views and portraits, plus a couple of striking Impressionist landscapes. They're grouped by subject: music and dancing, animals, a pastoral girl in a purple bonnet and frock. In one painting, she sits in a swing.

"When I would swing in a swing, I would put my feet up toward the sky to touch the clouds," Robinson says of what the painting means to her.

You can read her smiling resilience in each brushstroke, a lifetime of experience and effort in the simple scenes. She hopes her show will inspire other people, of all different abilities, that they can achieve the impossible—something she has been doing her whole life.

"She would never give up," says her sister, Gladys. "Just being around her prevents you from saying a whole lot of things: 'I can't do this'; 'Why am I hurting?'"

"When God gives you a gift, any kind of gift, you use it," Robinson says.

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Photo by Alex Boerner

Felicia Robinson

**S**he wasn't expected to live into adulthood. Born in Durham, Robinson lived at what is now called Lenox Baker Children's Hospital for the first six years of her life. They tried to teach her to use her hands with cumbersome appurtenances. "I always asked for a coloring book," she says. "My hands wouldn't work, so I started to pick up the crayon and use my mouth. I had more control over it with my mouth. I was a stubborn little girl."

Robinson has been an active advocate for "uniquely capable" people, her preferred term, from early on. As a child, she didn't like how people with autism were treated at the hospital. Sometimes, they would "put them in boxes" as a time-out, and later, Robinson wrote a letter to the hospital's director about it.

Surpassing the life expectancy predicted by her doctors, Robinson moved into her family home in Braggtown, where she developed a close bond with her mother. At the same time, she was fiercely independent and self-directed.

"Sometimes when I'm pushing her [in a wheelchair], you can tell people are asking each other, 'What's wrong with her?' That's one thing she does not like," Gladys says. "She would prefer if people ask her if they want to know something."

Before she retired, Robinson worked at the nonprofit Durham Exchange Club, or **DECI**, for more than 26 years. Among other positions, she worked as a teacher at the vocational program for people with disabilities. Gladys remembers when she was a horticulturist there and had an assistant who helped her plant.

"Now he has a general contractor job instead of just being a landscaper," Gladys says. "Look what he did with what he learned by assisting her."

Robinson's family keeps a binder of newspaper clippings about her, many from *The Herald-Sun*. There are clips from 1981 about her acting turn in *Detours*, a local play for actors with disabilities. There's a 1992 clip about DECI employees participating in National Employee Health and Fitness Day, when Robinson won a trophy for creating a poster. Another yellowed sheet, undated, shows her receiving a chin-controlled wheelchair from DECI. The story notes that Robinson "recently won an award for art from the National Association for Retarded Citizens," though her disability is physical, not mental. The blunt language reminds us of the social challenges people with different abilities have faced even in recent decades.

In 1988, Robinson decided that she wanted an even more independent life. It was hard for her mother to let her go.

"With 10 kids, my mom didn't think she was going to have an empty nest," says Gladys. "She was worried because it was when they were first starting those group homes. They'd take the people's money and wouldn't do right by them. But Felicia meant she wanted to live on her own, not in one of those places." Robinson moved into an accessible home near N.C. Central with her sister, Crystal. They still live together, though they moved back to the Braggtown house after their mother passed.

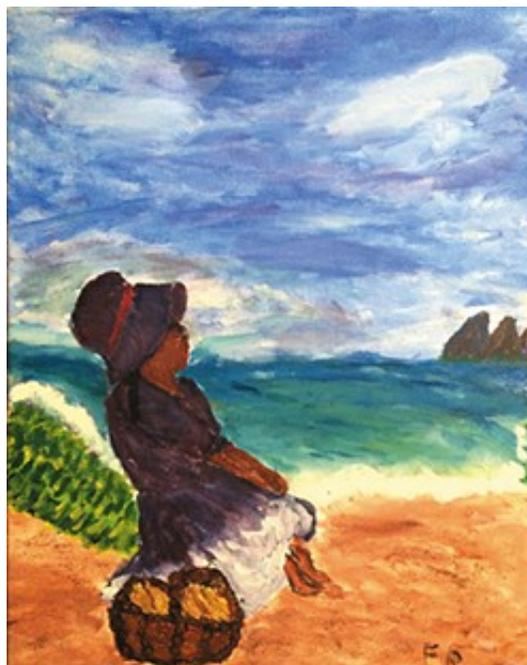
**A** vocational-support nonprofit called OE Enterprises helped Robinson begin reaching out to galleries once she had a substantial collection of new works to show. But after that, she, her family and Ritchie did it all themselves.

"Since she loves [art], that was a way of bringing her back out," Gladys says. "She used to smile all the time, but we hadn't been seeing it as much. Now she's smiling again."

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Ritchie met with Robinson and her family to begin the application process and venue search late last year.

"It was important that it happen soon, because there was momentum and excitement on Felicia's part," Ritchie says. "And the Carrack's zero-commission model was important, so I was trying to find a space that would allow us to put it on that way." She found one in her friend Alicia Lange's gallery. "It fits with SPECTRE's mission, trying to connect groups in Durham," Ritchie says, "and it expands our mission to reach parts of the community we haven't been able to."



by Felicia Robinson

*The Waiting Maiden*

At the Saturday-night opening reception, three days after I first met Robinson, SPECTRE Arts is packed. The nonprofit Arts Access got the word out to the disabled community, and a couple of wheelchairs can be seen. It doesn't hurt to turn out that Robinson has a large, supportive family, who have brought a church buffet-style dinner. People steadily revolve through the gallery, but the courtyard is the heart of the action. Robinson, holding court for a line of well-wishers, is positioned in front of a stage where her niece and nephew will soon perform a musical mime routine.

Robinson's brother, Garry, is a garrulous man with the big, easy smile that runs in the family. He used to take his sister to concerts and clubs: Stevie Wonder, Patti LaBelle, Richard Pryor.

"Everywhere we went, we got to go up front," Garry says. "On the dance floor, people would be looking like, 'What's she going to do?' And she'd start moving that wheelchair and I'd be like, 'Some of you pumping your arms and legs don't have as much movement as she does!'"

Garry remembers when Robinson first came home from the hospital as a child, when the 10 siblings slept in one room.

"We'd take her outside and put her on bicycles, do the best we could as far as making life normal," he says. "We never felt sorry for her because she always wanted everybody to treat her the same. People would think there was something wrong with her mind. Never. She's sharp as a whip."

Like all of his family members, Garry's life has been shaped by his sister's courageous example. He says she had more than 20 surgeries before a final one, about 20 years ago, caused her hands to curl in.

"She had more use of her hands before that, but that's what she wanted to try," he says. "I told her I could never, no way, have been as gracious and

graceful about all this. She did more with less than we did, and it's been a pleasure."

To hear her siblings tell it, Robinson only once seemed like she might give up, in an inactive period between 2008 and 2013. She had retired from DECI in 2006; she had been in the hospital for an infection and then her mother passed away.

"It really did something to all of us to see her depressed," Garry says. "I told her, 'Felicia, you know how we do, and you're not doing it.' I said, 'Mama would not appreciate this; you've come too far.' She started back painting then."

Robinson's siblings like to tell stories of her adventurousness getting her into scrapes. "One day, it was raining, and I asked Felicia not to go outside," her sister Michelle says. "We thought she had gone to the mall with her friends. We were waiting for the access van. Ten o'clock that night, I see this little light flashing outside. It was her cell phone. Her wheelchair was stuck in the mud. But she was determined to go back there and visit her dog."

After her show at SPECTRE, Robinson hopes to continue showing her art, and she also wants to start an art class for children. With her tenacity and ability to inspire, one has no doubt she will.

*This article appeared in print with the headline "Wheelchair unbound"*

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