

# Making Darkness Bright

Nancy McCurtin embraces artistry as a blind woman

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[Amy Kilgore Mangus](#), [Photography by Daria Amato](#)



NANCY McCURTIN discovered her passion for creating art later in life, and she is determined that nothing – not even blindness – will dampen her zeal.

In her early life, McCurtin spent years as a public school music teacher before transitioning to a career as an administrative assistant. After retiring in 2012, she relocated to Surf City to be closer to her family, enjoying the vibrant life of babysitting her grandchildren and actively participating in her church, Faith Harbor Methodist.

“I had always had a fascination with art, and I always said, ‘Oh, I wish I could paint,’” McCurtin says.

It was at a church dinner that she met JILL STROPHAL, an art teacher, and expressed this wish. Strophal’s response, “Well, come to my house. I give lessons,” set McCurtin on a path

that would profoundly shape her life. Her very first painting was a simple piece: a blue banjo.

Art became a joyful part of her routine, and McCurtin found some success, even selling some of her work. However, in April 2016, a devastating stroke left her completely blind.

“When that misfortune struck, I thought, ‘I can’t give up art. I just got started,’” she recalls. The initial months were marked by deep depression. “I remember just lying on the couch for weeks and weeks, about six months, just totally depressed,” McCurtin says. The sudden loss of sight left her feeling trapped, unable to engage in the activities she loved.

Yet, a voice within urged her to ask, “Well, what can you do?” Determined not to be defeated, McCurtin chose to channel her creative mind and began writing. She authored a book titled *Topsey the Blind Sea Turtle*, drawing inspiration from the slow, steady resilience of the tortoise in Aesop’s classic fable *The Tortoise and the Hare*.

“I thought, ‘Well, I’m the tortoise now,’” she says. The story features Topsey, a turtle who loses his vision but finds strength with the help of friends. The book’s success led to two more books, which she later compiled into *The Complete Story of Topsey, the Blind Sea Turtle*.

Returning to art, McCurtin adapted her techniques to her new reality. “I continued to take lessons and learned how to use tactile helpers such as string and pens,” she said. Her work took on a unique dimension, as she focused on tactile and 3D art.

Today, McCurtin is preparing to teach a class in January for visually impaired artists.

“Corey, my aide, has helped me get organized,” she says.

Her upcoming class will guide students in creating a 3D shipwreck scene complete with kelp forests and a treasure chest, using finger painting and textured materials.

“Being a shut-in is just the worst thing in the world because we are sociable creatures,” McCurtin says, expressing how meaningful it is for her to teach. She also emphasized the importance of continuing to create.

“It helps fight depression and all the bad things,” she says. Through her art and books, McCurtin aims to spread hope and show that “just because you have a disability doesn’t mean you’re done.”

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To view more of photographer Daria Amato’s work, go to [dariaphoto.com](http://dariaphoto.com)