

A painter uses her art to help create a culture of safety in memory of her fisherman husband.

By Jon Tattrie

Photos by Mike Dembeck

It's easy to see why Heather Crout fell in love with Scott Clarke. Looking up from under a brown shag of hair and a bushy moustache, his relaxed grin shows why she called him her goofy Newfie. Crout exhales, sets the framed photograph down. The picture was taken in the fall of 2009, three days before her husband died.



Crout's voice is steady, her face composed, belying the turmoil beneath the calm surface as she talks about Clarke. He was from an old Newfoundland fishing family and started on boats when he was just four. He moved to Oyster Pond seeking work in 1994 after the cod fishery collapsed. The small fishing community on the outskirts of eastern HRM quickly warmed to his gregarious charm and penchant for practical jokes. Crout worked at a local café and caught Clarke's eye. Crout's husband Ronnie had died of cancer at age 41 a few months before and she wasn't looking to start again. Clarke courted her for three years before she agreed to marry him.

They moved into Crout's rambling 120-year-old home and renovated the garage into an art studio. She can see the ocean when she picks up her brushes.

"I was the first love of Scott's life. He absolutely adored me," she remembers, smiling.

After working as a roofer for a few years for a steadier paycheque, he returned to the ocean.

"He absolutely loved it," his widow says. "In August, just before he died, he was sitting in the wing chair in the living room. He says, 'You know what, Heather? I think it's good that you pushed me into going over to the plant because I've got to where I'm feeling really peaceful.'"

One of the amateur astronomer's favourite spots was lying on his back on a fishing boat off the coast of Sable Island on the night watch, gazing at the vast universe overhead.

"It just blows your mind. The stars go on forever and forever and forever," Crout says.

The framed photo of Clarke was taken on the herring fishing boat he took his last trip on. Clarke and the other fishermen went into Fisherman's Cove in Eastern Passage to prepare for the job. He called his wife at 11 p.m. to say he wouldn't be home because they were going out for one more load.

"That was the last time I heard from him," she says. "They were eating pizza and talking. He said, 'I probably won't see you until tomorrow night. Love ya.' And that was it."

No one knows what happened that night. The owner of the boat went into the cabin while Clarke worked on the deck. The owner thought he heard Clarke call out but when he went to check on him, he was gone. He summoned the other boats and the Coast Guard and they frantically searched the water.

Crout raced into Halifax to watch the search from the shore. "We could see the helicopters and the Coast Guard and all the ships. It was like a mini city," she says. "Scott was not ready to go. He was too young. He was 39. I just thought he could swim."

She stops to sip her coffee. Regains her composure.

"Scott knew what he was doing out there. He never took unnecessary chances," she says, but he wasn't wearing a life jacket. Hardly any of the fishermen did. The old ones were bulky and uncomfortable and the workable new ones cost too much. The fishermen trusted their luck would hold. In 2008, nine people died in Nova Scotia's fishing industry. In 2009, eight died, including Clarke. Six have died so far in 2010.

By daylight, it was clear Clarke was gone. They figure he got tangled in the nets as they went into the water. He probably kicked off his boots and tried to swim free, but the vast, cold ocean overwhelmed him. All they found were his hat and boots.

Crout sailed to the spot where he went overboard on the anniversary of his death in September. Hurricane Igor was blowing past, stirring up the water. Crout made a wooden dory and filled it with flowers and messages for Clarke. The little boat disappeared as they returned to shore.

A memorial was raised in Newfoundland. Clarke didn't have any children to carry on his name and it broke Crout's heart to think he would have no legacy in Nova Scotia. She went to her studio and started painting. "I thought: these are going to be his children."

The first was Sunrise at Old Bonaventure, a watercolour of his birth village. More followed, depicting Clarke's life. The last shows the sun setting over fishermen at Eastern Passage. You can see Clarke preparing the boat for his final trip.

Near the anniversary of Clarke's death, she started to sell each painting for \$400 and used the money to buy a \$400 workable life vest with Clarke's name written inside. The paintings quickly sold out.

Crout donated the first vest to the man who was on the boat with Clarke and the second to a young local fisherman. It was her way of giving back to the community that grieved with her.

“This is a new tradition for these younger guys,” she says. “Maybe [their] families won’t have to go through what I’ve gone through.”

Tommy Harper, a workplace consultant with the Workers Compensation Board, says fishing deaths tend to come from rural areas and devastate whole communities. The most effective way to prevent those deaths is a cultural shift to where personal flotation devices are automatically worn. He calls Crout a “safety champion” who can drive that change.

“What she set out to do is very noble and it’s a great cause. You can wear them and you can work,” he says.

Crout will present a life vest to one fisherman a year for the next eight years. Then she’ll paint more babies for her lost husband and buy another vest. She wants to buy 42 vests, one for each fisherman in Clarke’s fleet.

“Every time they pick up one of those vests, they’ll remember what happened to Scott and how everyone here misses him. How I had to go through a lot. No family wants to go through that,” she says quietly.

She knows the workable life vests won’t save everyone, but it might have saved her husband. At the very least, it would have allowed them to recover his body. She hopes other fishermen hear her story and slip on a life vest.



“At least they’d have a fighting chance,” she says.