

Practicing the art of living

Nikki Araguz has been in the public eye for several years. Now the gallery owner just wants the world to see how normal her life is.

By Alyson Ward

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Art covers the walls from floor to ceiling at the Starving Artist, a new Montrose-area gallery. Tables and glass cases display jewelry, sculpture and trinkets. Sunlight beams through big windows in the converted house on West Alabama, and a toy poodle named Bentley greets visitors at the door.

Last week, one of the gallery's owners - petite, with big blue eyes - welcomed some first-time shoppers.

"We have 67 local artists," she said. "Everything is handmade; you're welcome to look around the studio. My name is Nikki."

They didn't seem to recognize her. But since the Starving Artist opened in December, several customers have realized she's *that* Nikki: Nikki Araguz, the widow of a Wharton County firefighter who has spent the past three years at the center of a high-profile court battle over the legitimacy of her marriage. She has courted reality TV, become a public speaker, ridden in the Houston Gay Pride Parade. And now, while she waits for the case to wind through the appeals process, she's running an art gallery with her new fiance in the heart of Houston.

Araguz, 37, was the transgender wife of Thomas Araguz, who was killed in 2010 fighting a massive fire at a Wharton County egg farm. When he died, his mother and ex-wife filed a lawsuit to keep Nikki Araguz from receiving any benefits; they want the entire amount - more than \$600,000 - to go to the fallen firefighter's two young sons. They argued that the marriage wasn't legally binding because Nikki Araguz was born a man, and in 2011, a judge agreed. Araguz has appealed the case and believes it will be heard in the state's 13th Court of Appeals later this year.

"My life has been very, very public," Araguz said last week.

That's an understatement. Even as a teen, she made the rounds of talk shows - "Jerry Springer," "Maury Povich" - to disclose that she was born a boy but developed, physically and emotionally, as a woman. She legally changed her name to Nikki in 1996 and had sex reassignment surgery in 2008, two months after she married Thomas Araguz, who was her second husband.

After his death, she was featured on "20/20." Transgender activists took up her cause. In August 2011, Out magazine published a 6,000-word profile of Araguz along with a glamorous photo of her draped in the Texas flag.

But Araguz wasn't an ideal poster child for any cause; for months after her husband's death, her life looked like a train wreck. She moved in with a boyfriend in San Francisco until he took her car one night and totaled it in a crash that killed the other driver. Araguz returned to Texas and landed in more trouble: She spent nearly a month in jail last year for stealing a woman's Rolex at a local bar. (She still insists, as she did to police, that it was a drunken swap and not a theft.)

When she was released, Araguz planned to move far away from Texas and never come back. But something made her stay.

"The day I got out of jail, God had a different plan for me, " she said. "I rented an apartment that week here in Houston and decided to plant roots. It was not 30 days later I met Will."

That was last spring. William Loyd, 33, says he met Araguz online. Her dating profile included a link to her website, which spilled the whole story. Instead of being scared away, Loyd was intrigued.

"I just thought that the more I saw about her," Loyd said, "the more interesting and amazing she was."

The couple first met in person last May. Now they've moved into a townhome just around the corner from their new business.

"You don't get to pick who you fall in love with, and I can testify that to anybody, " said Loyd.

Loyd, the father of two, is a self-taught artist who has always dabbled in creative work. When they got together last spring, Araguz urged him to focus more on his art.

"The next thing you know, our apartment was filled up with paintings," she said. "So then, I was like, well, I guess we need a gallery."

Last fall, the couple cashed out a 401(k) from Loyd's former job as a roughneck for an offshore drilling company. They rented space near the corner of Shepherd and West Alabama and started inviting local artists to sell their work.

When the gallery opened Dec. 1, the Starving Artist featured four artists. By last week, Araguz and Loyd had made deals with 67 artists. Almost all are local; their ages range from 8 (that's Loyd's daughter, Charlotte) to 83.

The Starving Artist will work with just about any artist who wants to sell some work.

"Most of our artists are trying to get their name out there," Loyd said.

Almost nothing costs more than \$500, and the merchandise moves fast, they say; the gallery recently sold 30 pieces in a single weekend.

Loyd's own work is scattered here and there on the gallery's walls; they're the pieces with a shiny surface, a new medium he's developing and describes as "oil-based watercolors on steroids."

Araguz paints a bit, but mostly she designs jewelry - big, sturdy necklaces and rings full of bright garnet, citrine, topaz. A pair of her ruby and amethyst earrings sells for \$150; an amethyst and biwa pearl necklace is \$385.

Araguz and Loyd want to open multiple Starving Artist galleries in cities across the country, starting with The Woodlands and Austin. They also offer 200 of the gallery's paintings for sale on their website, thestarvingartistgallery.com.

"I will be able to sit back and relax when we've opened our 15th store," Araguz said.

Araguz still gets recognized around town - and of course, in her own gallery. The woman who calls herself an "accidental activist" is making the most of her controversial celebrity.

She earns extra cash by accepting calls to DialAStar, a phone service that connects callers to celebs such as Michael Lohan (father of Lindsay) and rapper Waka Flocka Flame. Callers pay \$10 a minute to chat with her.

"It's flattering when people want to (talk)," Araguz said. "It can be uncomfortable at times; it depends on how people want to reach out, and how aggressively."

Araguz has talked with a producer about a movie about her life, and she plans to write a book to tell her story. She wants to be on TV, too. Later this month, she says, she'll fly to Los Angeles and meet with a producer about a reality show that would feature her with Loyd and his children, at the gallery and at home. After the chaos of the past three years, she wants to show people how normal her life is, after all.

A reality show would "put the 'regular family' aspect on what's already been sensationalized," she said. "We're just an American family."

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