From Mini Hobby to Maxi Passion

by Pam North

Martyna Zalewska, of Little Stuff Miniatures, doesn't describe herself as a recognized and experienced miniaturist; she views herself as a relative newcomer to the small world where everything is possible – miniatures.   
 Zalewska lives in north Poland, in a small town that is home to the biggest Gothic castle in Europe. Mother to a 7-year-old daughter, she is a busy lady, helping her parents to manage three kindergartens, running a language school, and teaching English to groups of teenagers. She finds time for miniatures by squeezing them in anytime she can during nights, weekends, holidays, winter breaks, and during summer vacation. “Since I’ve started the miniature hobby, the laundry basket at my house is constantly overfilled, and my husband has had to learn how to iron his own shirts and how to cook, “ she joked. “My family and friends always have known I am 'that crafty person' - I suppose you can find at least one in every family. As a child I used to ruin all the family photos by cutting out heads of my parents and sister, and sticking them onto my drawings. Everyone had to be on their guard against me and my ever-present crafting set with scissors, glue and colorful markers.”  
 “I remember sitting at my grandma’s flat, spending hours trying to construct a cardboard city of my own. I have to confess, it never reflected my visions of how it should look, but I was only 8 or 9 then. Like every girl, I had a Barbie, and all those little things designed for her, but years later, when I became a mother, I decided to buy my daughter Sylvanian Families (Calico Critters) instead of the overwhelming pink Barbie. To be honest, I have no idea which of us, my daughter or myself, was more excited about those little houses, vehicles, furniture, and food. Especially the food. I think it brought back some pleasant memories of my own childhood.”  
 Later, Zalewska was teaching her young students some everyday vocabulary, and by sheer coincidence she came across cheap sets of furniture in 1:12 scale in a local supermarket - little furniture for every single room found in a typical house. They were poor quality, but were perfect for teaching her pupils, so she bought them all. She still was missing other items for some of the words from the vocabulary list, so she decided to search for the pieces on the Internet. Once Google had shown the search results, she entered the very first online store, and she was hooked. A month later, to her husband’s dismay, a large, four-story dollhouse had been placed on the chest of drawers in the living room of their very small flat. The kitchen was the first of 12 rooms she had to furnish, and when the walls, floor, and cupboards had been done, and the last piece of furniture had been placed, it was time for the final touches. She opened the box with the miniatures of vegetables she had ordered from a dollhouse shop, but was disappointed; it was not what she had expected, lacking the realism she had wanted.   
 “Once again the Internet became my best advisor.. After massive research I decided that I couldn’t afford custom-made veggies and fruits, and that the only solution was to make them myself.   
That is how I started mastering polymer clay miniature art. As a beginner, to check whether my creations were acceptable, I published some photos of my miniatures on Facebook. The response was a surprise - people wanted to buy my work! It was all very flattering, but as it was just my hobby, my private passion, and my anti-stress therapy. I didn’t want to sell anything. My miniaturist friends encouraged me to make different vegetables, so I made leeks, asparagus, tomatoes, and many more. I tend to be a little too ambitious on realism, so most of my vegetables and fruits can be sliced or cut in halves. My cabbages, halved in any direction, reveal all their layers, leaf by leaf.”

She kept making veggies, and refusing to sell any of them. Then she met an owner of a miniature shop who insisted on buying her vegetables, and she finally gave in. “ I am very grateful for his persistence,” she said. A few days after her very first order had reached its destination, she received an invitation to exhibit in The Miniature Show. She was thrilled with the honor of joining known artists after just 6 months into making miniatures. She felt that ahe needed some help, so she asked Anna, another member of the Polish miniaturists’ group, to share the adventure with her. “What I find an incontrovertible truth about miniatures is that it connects people with very strong ties of friendship,” she commented. Later, she also asked another talented miniaturist, Gosia Suchodolska, who had given Zalewska tips on working with polymer clay, and Zalewska asked her to participate in the upcoming show with her and Anna. Over the next weeks they spent hours on the telephone working on the details of the workshops and show - three women from different parts of Poland, with divergent life experiences, sharing their love of miniatures. They decided to cooperate as The Polish Miniature Trio, sharing friendship, unceasing motivation, and inspiration as they create.   
 “Whether making or just collecting miniatures, I wish everyone friends like the ones I have met. Miniatures are about people and the passion you share with them. That beautiful 4-story dollhouse is still waiting for me to find some time to work on it. I think it will need to wait until my retirement – I am 27 years old, so just 40 more years to go! “

What started as a hobby for Martyna ZalewbackupSie\*\*ame3

ska has turned into a lifelong adventure.