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# High Profile

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## EDITH BAKER

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ew people earn the title "Legend" during their lifetime. Edith Baker is one of them.

At the Dallas Visual Art Center's Legend Awards earlier this year, Ms. Baker was humble and soft-spoken. She used her acceptance speech to recognize others — her husband Fred, their children Jeff and Rini, her expected grandchildren, and the many artists who have contributed to and benefited from the

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Emergency Artist Support League, or EASL, which she co-founded. As an immigrant, wife, artist, teacher, mother, philanthropist and businesswoman, Edith Baker has lived many lives in her 74 years. Her eponymous gallery is one of Dallas' oldest and most reputable. For 20 years she's weathered the ups and downs of the local art scene. Five years ago she collaborated to care for her family of North Texas artists as a co-founder of EASL. But when she's praised, "she always turns it back on you," says her colleague and friend Nancy Whitnack of Conduit Gallery.

"Art is her way of life. It's not one moment," says Ruth Litwin, a friend, fellow artist and former student of Ms. Baker. "She lives what she thinks. She's always helping people in her quiet way. She doesn't tell you all the things she does, she just does it. When good things happen, people don't always know it's from her. She's a true charitable person."

Although she has lived throughout Europe and the United States, since 1951 she has called Dallas home. After all, "Only in America can a young girl from Sofia, Bulgaria, become a legend in Dallas," she says. "This is truly a land of opportunity." And Edith Baker has taken

advantage of every opportunity life offers.

Bulgaria was a "gentle, charming little country with a king and a queen, princes and princesses," Ms. Baker says. "It's jolly, with stoutheads drinking and good-looking Slavic people."

Her family was among the 40,000 Jews in the country of 7 million. Her father passed away when she was 5 years old, the same year her older brother left to study in France. She started drawing and painting when she was 6, while her peers were playing jacks.

"My love affair with art before I knew what art meant," she says of her youth. At 14 she started at the American college in Bulgaria, where she mastered six languages (French, German, Spanish, English, Russian and her native Bulgarian) and graduated in 1943. Bulgaria was under German control and young Edith and her family lived with "the fear of the hunted."

When she was 20, her family, formerly a leading cosmetics manufacturer in eastern Europe, was deported. Her brother was sent to a labor camp. She was shipped out by train with her mother, who had served as president of Red Cross, and her aunt. When the three women saw an opportunity to escape their car while the guards were looking away, they walked to their salvation. The trio fled to the *Stara Planina*, or the "Old Mountain," where they lived a transient life for two years. At one point they sought refuge across the Danube River from Romania. During this time they often shared quarters with as many as eight other Jews.

Following the war, Edith Arté returned to Bulgaria where she worked as a translator and interpreter. In 1948, Fred Baker came from

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hanging a picture on the wall. It's a visual history. It has given me a view of the world.

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— Edith Baker

BY CATHERINE CUELLAR



## A survivor herself, she's an advocate for the struggling artist

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the United States to help resettle the Jews of Bulgaria to Israel. Edith was assigned to work for Mr. Baker, which she did for three months. A year later, they were married in Haifa, Israel.

### New Americans

The couple arrived by boat in New York City, continuing to Chicago where she met her husband's family. Here, Mr. Baker earned his master's degree in social work, while she sold cosmetics at Saks Fifth Avenue. At night, she took continuing education courses at the Art Institute of Chicago, filling any extra time by teaching private French lessons.

But Chicago was cold and overwhelming to the young woman who had spent only two hours each day outside her hiding place during the war years. She was friendless, lonely and still in culture shock.

In August 1951, the Bakers arrived at Dallas' Union Station in

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107-degree heat. Mr. Baker had taken a job with the American Jewish Committee here.

Ms. Baker says "the city of cowboys and Neiman Marcus" was a "rude awakening" from Chicago. The couple soon settled into an apartment building behind the Inwood movie theater.

none of her Bulgarian relatives live in the United States, her transplanted family tree has grown to include her family by marriage and the many artists she has worked with over the years.

After the birth of their son, Jeff, in Dallas in 1952 and their daughter, Rini, in 1957 during a two-year stay in Paris, Mr. Baker returned to the States. Mrs. Baker and the children stayed with her brother in Portugal for six months. It was there that she began sculpting in Portuguese marble. When she returned to the North Dallas home where she still lives today, she continued to order marble from overseas. She decided to import marble table tops, and "before I knew it I had a corporation." By 1959, the Baker Marble Company involved daily meetings with architects and designers.

Baker Marble still imports much of the marble used in Dallas today. Two of Ms. Baker's collectors were surprised to learn the gallery owner had founded the company that sold them the marble they used for the floors in their home. But she gave up the business after just a few years. "I enjoyed it and I think I could have grown with it," she says, but she quit to spend time with her children while they were young.

The Bakers built a studio behind their house in the early '60s, and Ms. Baker taught art classes there for 15 years. "For me it was an amazing treat to discover I was able to open minds, change perceptions and see results," she says. "To see personality changes and lifestyle changes."

"She always related extremely well to her students," says Ruth Litwin, one of Ms. Baker's former students. "She was able to steer and guide them by their own insight. She felt or saw where they were going and taught them to continue in their own handwriting rather than copy someone else. . . . She was an artist herself, so she understood what we were trying to do. I think she's done that with her gallery too."

## SELF-PORTRAIT



Edith Baker examines some art work with assistant Cidnee Patrick at her gallery

Jeanne Chvosta, Edith Baker and Patricia Meadows at the EASL party held last summer.



PHOTO: Richard Michael Pruitt

### Edith Reyna Arië Baker

**Date and place of birth:** May 5, 1923, in Sofia, Bulgaria.

**Occupation:** A lover of art.

**A recent favorite book:** *Emperor of the Air*, Short Stories by Ethan Canin.

**My ideal vacation:** To be near a vast body of water.

**I drive a:** Good car.

**My hero is:** The unsung artist.

**The best advice I could give a 20-year-old is:** Seize the opportunity!

**My last meal would be:** Anything ending with a scrumptious chocolate mousse.

**My trademark expression:** Live for today.

**My worst habit is:** Allowing stuff to accumulate.

**My best asset is:** My beautiful family.

My children are also my very best friends.

**Behind my back, people**



PHOTO: Joe Laird

Patricia and Curtis Meadows with Edith Baker at the Legend

**Guests at my fantasy dinner party:** Tete a tete with Fred Astaire, skip the food and dance cheek to cheek with the most elegant dancer ever!

**If I had a different job, I'd be:** Rich!

**Favorite time of day:** A glorious Dallas sunset.

**Favorite city outside Dallas:** Paris.

**I'm happiest when:** I can impart knowledge and my love of art to people who care enough to listen.

**If I could change one thing about myself, it would be:** To be patient, please, and I want it now!

**I regret:** Regretting anything is an exercise in futility.



Ms. Baker took classes at the Dallas Museum of Art, studying with masters like Octavio Medellin in sculpture and Otis Dozier in painting. Because of her passion for art, her temple, Temple Emanu-El, asked her to teach a course on understanding modern art.

She was initially reserved about teaching, describing herself as "frightened, insecure, unprepared." Using a curriculum prepared by Brandeis University, she learned with her students over the next three years, discovering communication skills she didn't know she had. "I was curious about opportunities and possibilities." She felt "secure, articulate and communicative. . . . It was the beginning of my love affair with teaching."

Her husband, Fred, was always supportive of her work. "She loves her profession, does it well and is

very sincere," he says. "I didn't hear any discussion whatsoever, 'Why is Edith doing this?' or 'Why is Edith doing that?' She's a woman that once she makes up her mind she will do it. She has objectives and goals and I've never questioned when she said she wanted to do this or that, because she had already thought it out. This is what she wanted to do and I've always respected her thoughts and her desires."

## Family ties

Those who know Ms. Baker today know that her family has ultimate importance in her life. Because

The Bakers' backyard is filled with her work from those years. The walls of her home are covered with work by the artists she represents. Although she champions contemporary artists in her gallery, an afternoon discussion also touches on her favorite works by Caravaggio, Vermeer and Matisse. Art was always part of the environment for the Baker family.

The family, who almost always had dinners together, has remained close. Son Jeff has pursued a career in photography and married Michele Clement. Daughter Rini is now expecting her first child (and Edith and Fred's first grandchild) with husband Roger Andres in November. Both Baker children live in Dallas and often come, with their spouses, to their parents' house for Sunday brunch.

## Solid reputation

By 1977 Ms. Baker stopped making art to open her first gallery, Collectors Choice, with two partners in Preston Royal.

After her partners left in 1981, she renamed the store, the Edith Baker Gallery. She stayed at the North Dallas location until 1987, when she moved the business closer to Dallas' cultural center, at Cedar Springs and Maple.

Through the gallery Ms. Baker has used her skills as an artist and a teacher to relate to her collectors and the artists she represents. They consider her a friend, not just an

associate. "Her art now is showing artists and helping them achieve their goals. She has the heart of an artist," Ms. Litwin says.

Even potential competitors such as Conduit Gallery's Ms. Whitenack consider Ms. Baker a "soul mate." Their cooperative efforts include the Dallas Art Dealers Association (DADA) and EASL, and Ms. Whitenack credits Ms. Baker with DADA's regeneration in recent years.

"If there is not an association of dealers working together to try to achieve some common goals, then each of us is out here isolated trying to make things happen on our own," Ms. Whitenack says.

"That doesn't make a vibrant, vital, energetic art community happen."

"Edith loves art, likes being around artists, and wants to take care of artists," says Ms. Litwin. "That's why she started EASL. Artists were ill, and she couldn't bear that."

Through Ms. Baker and Ms. Whitenack's efforts five years ago,

EASL today helps the North Texas art community support itself. Many local charities and private fund-raisers ask artists to donate their work for auction each year.

This diminishes artists' gallery sales and consumes time needed for their paid work. But without hesitation, artists give to the annual EASL auction because, "Every artist that I have seen and talked to about EASL knows if they give work to that organization, they will get something back if needed," says collage artist Norman Kary.

Mr. Kary had his first show at the Edith Baker Gallery four years ago and also donates his work to

EASL fund-raisers.

Since its inception EASL has grown to serve artists in 10 North Texas counties, granting financial assistance for surgeries, transplants, physical rehabilitation, replacement of flood and fire damaged property and rent assistance for uninsured or partially insured artists. This year their fund-raising total reached almost \$95,000, and the group has distributed \$45,000 with other grants pending.

"It's not going to pay the whole bill, but it means I can pay for one element," says one grant recipient. "It's making things easier on other folks."

After receiving a grant from EASL, privacy is important because financial instability can be embarrassing. Artists are usually stereotyped as struggling, but among professional working artists, few want to leave debts hanging over them.

"As artists we don't have the

support system most people do," says an artist who donated work to EASL, then needed aid. When grant money was awarded, "it made me realize I'm valued by this group of people as a professional artist. We're going to help you. Before that we felt out on a limb."

Although there are no long-term plans to expand EASL eligibility beyond North Texas, Ms. Baker says, "We are hoping from our experience that many other communities like San Antonio and Austin will follow suit and do similar fund-raisers to help their artists."

For the past four years she's also

worked with the Legacy Counseling Center to offer a one-day show of artwork by people with AIDS. And last year her annual holiday "Hope"-themed group show benefited Camp Esperanza, funding three scholarships for kids with cancer.

"Any gallery in town could do that," notes Mr. Kary. But few do, he says.

"It's a deep love for art and the artists here in town that has caused her to be as well respected as she is," says Mr. Kary.

## Eye for art

This gentle woman also has surprising inner toughness, and she's not afraid to show it. For Norman Kary's first exhibition in her gallery "she knew her space well enough to know that this wouldn't work or it would look better this way," he says. "I didn't like her suggestion, but it worked in the final analysis, so I couldn't argue."

"She's not wishy-washy," says Ms. Whitenack.

The first time Carol Wilder and her husband Larry Inge told Ms. Baker they were collaborating in their work, they had a "polite disagreement" about its quality and appeal, Ms. Wilder says.

But as years passed, "She could see that we were committed to continuing, and she committed herself to keep watching," Mr. Inge says. When she felt they had work worth exhibiting, she offered them a show with Denise Brown, which opens Oct. 24.

Ms. Brown, who has been represented by Ms. Baker for seven

years, was initially attracted by Ms. Baker's "stick-to-it-ness" and "incredible passion and belief for art in general."

"She's a good problem-solver creatively," Ms. Brown says. "She helps artists solve formal aesthetic problems."

"There are very few galleries I can take my transition pieces in," says Ms. Wilder. "When I changed [styles], sales dropped and I never felt like I was in danger. I always felt freedom to explore creatively, and I could always talk to her about that."

As for Ms. Baker, she's proven she can change with the times. Her immediate future promises the excitement of grandparenthood, and she plans to continue teaching about art from her gallery. Her outlook is captured in her favorite lines of poetry by Joseph Albers:

*"Art is not an object  
but experience.  
To be able to perceive it  
We need to be receptive.  
Therefore art is there  
where art seizes us."*

"Art isn't a question of hanging a picture on the wall. It's a visual history," she says. "It has given me a view of the world. It is my favorite language, and I communicate freely through it." Her gallery is just the latest stage of her personal mission to teach and educate others about her passion.

Always a survivor, "I find my life has been in stages of experiences," she says. "New opportunities come your way. I'm a taker of opportunities. If you don't, you may never see it again."