She looks like a grown-up version of a little girl, sitting on a bar stool with one foot tucked under her. She’s wearing overalls and has a smudge of blue paint on her neck. Her paintings cover the walls like a crazy quilt and her guitar, along with two child-size instruments wait on the stairs. This is unmistakably an artist surrounded by the tools and rewards of her trade.

Karla (Ducky) Gladen, the star of Two Chicks and a Paintbrush, is a very young 40, not immature mind you, but as chatty and bubbly as a precocious toddler. Gladen talks as if there’s not enough time to convey all the dreams she has for the children of Frisco, especially those who are disadvantaged. It’s a situation with which she can identify. Gladen spent her early years in a trailer park living in a baby-blue bus. With a raging alcoholic as a father, her abused and frightened mother protected her child in the only way she knew how, by getting her father out of the house, which often meant leaving Gladen alone to fend for herself. Her painting ability as yet undiscovered, Gladen found release in writing. Writing, she said, was therapy for her soul. She remembers feeling compelled to get out of her deplorable situation. “Sometimes,” she said, “There wasn’t enough soap to get out the filth.” Saying this, her mind has clearly traveled back to times best forgotten.

She became a self-described “hellacious teenager,” and believes if she had had art or music into which to pour her feelings, things might have been different. Eventually her grandparents and an aunt rescued her and gave her a new home. More than providing a safe and stable home, they provided the basis for her love of artistry. Her grandfather, Pa, made magnetic signs and worked as a skilled carpenter. She still cherishes and uses each tool and gift he gave her. Pa shared his love and his art with Gladen. As he worked, young Gladen peppered him with questions, all of which he patiently answered. From him she learned the value of work and the value of family. Through his love, patience and kindness, Pa also shared the truth of the value of children, a value that guides her actions today.

When she graduated from those awful teen years, Ducky went on to college, earning nine hours in each of three different degree programs and auditing the equivalent of six semesters all just to satisfy her love of learning. Lack of intelligence was in no way the problem, but rather a desire to stay “under the radar,” feeding her need to remain unnoticed. By 30 she was a corporate marketing manager, a role that severely cramped her Bohemian style. All the education and experience stuck but the lifestyle didn’t. She was pursuing a dream, and though she knew this wasn’t it, she wasn’t yet sure what was. A good friend finally convinced Gladen to take the plunge and quit the job she hated in favor of working with children. First, she went to the classroom, but that proved too confining. Another friend offered her a job coaching soccer with Soccer Shots in Frisco. She began traveling to different schools offering one-on-one soccer lessons to students. Then, through the company she founded with good friend Meredith Robnett, Two Chicks and a Paintbrush, she began offering art and music lessons, utilizing the training she received along the way at the Art Institute of Dallas and at The Old Chicken Farm Art Center in San Angelo.

Loosed from confinement, her artistic spirit has blossomed. Just since the beginning of this year, Gladen has begun painting . . . and painting . . . and painting. And when she started painting, people started buying. Her art, mostly abstract, reflects her moods, showing her bright and playful side, as well as her darker, brooding side. Gladen says, that though she’s usually happy, she tends to a tortured mind, and her art, as well as her music, gives voice to all her sides.

Now Gladen is close to living her dream. She rises close to 4 a.m. to paint nearly every day and, then after lessons end, she picks up the brush again until around midnight. After just a few hours of sleep, she paints for a few hours, and then heads off to schools for Soccer Shots and to private art and guitar lessons. With her love for children, her days are close to ideal. She offers both private and group lessons, going to homes or bringing kids into her studio. “I give the children grown-up tools to use: knives, brushes, paints. I teach them the proper way to handle them and they use them carefully.” Pointillism and the paint-flinging Pollack style, as well as traditional painting styles are all in Gladen’s arsenal. She provides the materials and lets the kids go at it. Paper, canvas, wood and walls (only with permission of the owner) are all fair targets for their paint. She wants them to know they can be creative in their choice of a painting surface, that anything can become their canvas.

She’s close to living the dream, but only close. Gladen hopes one day to open an art center or, in homage to her roots, a used school bus where children can come to learn and express themselves regardless of ability to pay. The bus would allow her to take her studio to rural or inner city areas that might have little to offer in the way of art inspiration. She wants to provide a way for children to learn art or guitar, to give them an outlet for their feelings, something she thinks might have made a difference for her. In her dream center, children who can’t afford to pay for lessons, can work for them, doing jobs, being useful. It would also provide a central location for lessons, which would provide Gladen more time for teaching. As it is, she spends a lot of time traveling between homes, often on her powder-pink motor scooter.

She’s not sure how the center will come to be, or whether it will be fixed or mobile, but she’s sure that her business partner, Meredith Robnett, will be instrumental. Gladen credits Robnett with keeping her on track and managing the finances. She quotes Robnett as telling her, “You need to focus on painting. Just paint.” And that’s what she does. Financially, Gladen doesn’t ask for much. She says she still remembers her childhood years in the baby-blue school bus, and those memories make her grateful just to pay the rent. Gladen says, “It’s still weird to me to be able to go to the grocery store to buy food.” Robnett often has to caution Gladen against giving her paintings away. Gladen says Robnett tells her to think of payment as supplies for the kids. Since the kids are what it’s all about for Gladen, she’s taken it to heart and keeps it in mind when she’s selling her work.

Until Gladen and Robnett realize their dream of an art center, group and private lessons are available in children’s homes or in Gladen’s home. Gladen also offers art parties for groups of children. To view Gladen’s work or get more information about lessons or parties, visit [www.twochicksandapaintbrush.com](http://www.twochicksandapaintbrush.com) for information. Usually Robnett will follow up with a phone call to make arrangements.

“This is what I was born to do,” says Gladen, and after just a few minutes with her it’s clear that she’s absolutely right.