



Left: Mark, Julie and their daughter Bethany.
Below: Weir On The Move, their new boat home.



'We quit our jobs and sold our house to live our dream life ON A CANAL BOAT!'

Julie Weir, 46, and her husband Mark, 48, knew there was more to life than the daily office grind, so they took a big risk...

Gazing out at the hazy Wiltshire riverbank from the window of her canal boat, professional artist Julie Weir lets out a contented sigh. With her easel set out before her, she's midway through painting a hare, painstakingly brushing on each individual hair in minute detail. By her side, husband Mark taps away at his keyboard, deep in the midst of his latest historical novel. Later, they'll stop for lunch and a meander along the canal towpath, and, if they feel like it, they putter gently along the water to a new mooring, never staying in one place for too long.

It's an easy, happy existence that Julie had never even dreamed of a few years ago. Making a living as a creative simply wasn't something the mum-of-two had ever contemplated – in fact, she even received a G grade for her Art O-Level. 'For years, I was too busy to do much in the way of creative projects,' she explains. 'I was a Family Support Officer, working with families from deprived backgrounds and children on the At Risk register. Naturally, it was very stressful

and was the kind of job you took home with you in the evening. The most creative thing I managed in my free time was making the odd pair of curtains!'

Meanwhile, Julie's husband of 30 years Mark was exhausted from working up to 70 hours a week as an estate agent. Despite his long hours, he still found the time to pen two novels, but his modest income from writing meant he couldn't give up his day job.

With their grown-up kids living away from home, Julie and Mark were sure there must be more to life than working in such stressful jobs, but they weren't sure how they could feasibly alter their lives.

Everything changed when their beloved Border Collie Jack died. Distraught, Julie browsed the internet, looking for an artist to paint a pet portrait to remember him by. 'All the artists I came across were charging anything from £600 a painting to £2000, and we simply couldn't afford it,' says Julie. 'So Mark suggested I give it a go myself, with a paint set someone had given me the previous Christmas. I hadn't painted anything at all since school, so I was sceptical at first, but I decided to try it.'

Julie started by sketching Jack's outline, and was amazed when the picture seemed to come to life on the page. Every evening, she'd rush home from work to sit at the kitchen table with her paint brushes. 'I was astonished at how well he turned out,' she

says. 'I painted every individual hair on his body, and somehow the sketch seemed to look so much like the real Jack. Mark couldn't believe it when I showed him.'

After 35 hours of painting in the evenings, the portrait was complete and took pride of place on their wall. Eager to carry on with her new-found skill, Julie joined a local art class and found that she had a real talent for painting both animals and city scapes.

'I just wish I'd started earlier – it seems

absurd that I spent my whole life not knowing I have a skill that brings me so much happiness,' she says. 'My art teacher was really encouraging, and, when she suggested I enter a painting into the BBC Wildlife Artist Of The Year competition, I put together an application – but never dreamed I'd hear anything back.'

But Julie did hear back. In fact, she was a finalist in

the competition – a mere two years after she first set brush to paper with Jack's portrait. 'That was when I really thought that maybe there was something in this, that I could make a go of it and do something with my art.'

New career

When her department at work began to make cuts, Julie was offered the chance to take a redundancy pay out or reapply for her role. Tentatively, she took the redundancy, knowing

'There's a lovely community – moving at 4 mph, you bump into the same people'