

H. Dean Willis Bio



H. Dean Willis, - Class of 1962 - b. 1944 From the EHS Yearbook, *The Maroon*: Intended School of Higher education - Chicago Art Institute; Football 2,3,4; Track 2,3,4; E Club 3,4; Intramural Basketball 2,3,4.

8/19/2016 By Stefanie Dell'Aringa, Daily Herald correspondent

Elgin watercolor artist has a passion for painting. West Dundee artist H. Dean Willis works almost every day in his studio in Elgin. He will never forget when his sailboat painting made it onto the cover of a Hallmark greeting card. He was only 19 years old.

“They looked at 30 artists at a time,” he recalled, of his three-month trial with Hallmark. “I was the first one among the 30 to get a card design produced.”

Fast forward to present day: Willis, a 72-year-old West Dundee resident, has been a featured artist at fine art shows throughout the Fox Valley area, including St. Charles and Geneva. Most recently, he attained master-level status membership in the American Watercolor Society and received an award for one of his paintings which was chosen to be part of the 148th Annual International Exhibition, limited to about 150 artists.

“The American Watercolor Society is the top venue to be associated with and you get to enter one painting a year for this exhibition,” Willis said.

Willis entered “Best Friends,” a 30-by-19-inch watercolor painting of his friend Mike Kenyon and his dog, Bacchus.

“He and I have this great love of animals,” said Kenyon, who attended high school with Willis.

It was a moment Willis captured on film, of Kenyon carrying his sick dog that served as a reference picture for the award-winning painting.

“There's emotions that you have to tie yourself to to make these paintings true,” Willis explained.

Willis devotes himself mainly to painting “agri-frags,” agricultural fragments found on Kenyon's 143-year-old dairy farm.

“He had asked me, ‘Mike, can I come up to the farm and paint stuff?’” recalled Kenyon, a third generation farmer in South Elgin.

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It makes perfect sense for Willis to feel passionate about painting farm objects. He spent his early childhood on his grandmother's farm in southern Illinois before moving to the Elgin area.

One of his paintings, "Cementia," features a bolt with a red wire attached to it, stretching horizontally above a piece of cement. The piece won Honorable Mention in the "Best Art of 2006" edition of Artist's Magazine.

THE EARLY DAYS

Willis had an older brother who loved to draw comics. Wanting to be like him, he'd get paper and pencil to copy him. He drew in high school -- graduating from Elgin High School in 1962 -- and was featured in the newspaper for his work. He enrolled in the American Academy of Art in Chicago where he was discovered by a Hallmark representative after she reviewed his portfolio. He worked there for 2½ years and returned to Chicago to be near family.

"It wasn't easy finding work in Chicago," he said. "There are no greeting card companies here."

Ultimately, Willis found commercial art work as an illustrator and art director. Over the next two decades, he worked for companies owned by ABC and Disney doing art direction for magazines.

"I would lay out the magazines and the pictures and I would illustrate the covers every month," he said. "I didn't have anybody controlling me, and I liked the freedoms I had compared to Hallmark."

All went well for many years, until the digital age changed the way magazines were put together.

"I started illustrating on the computer," he said. "I was art directing five publications at one point in one month and I had some people under me, typesetters and others."

At 57, he was let go and had to find another job. His second wife, Mindy, had encouraged him to rent a studio and return to painting.

"People are gifted in certain things," his wife, Mindy Willis, said. "I thought I could paint, but when I saw what Dean could do, I just gave up. I'm really proud of him."

Willis joined art leagues and started others, and found success in selling his work through art fairs.

"There was a time period where you could sell your art easily at art fairs and make quite a good living at it," he said.

For years, he and Mindy traveled the states showing his pieces, and in the summers, sold at local fairs, and exhibited work in galleries.

Work ethic

Willis can devote up to six hours a day every day for two months to finish a piece, particularly if it's egg tempera, his latest media. His pieces range in price from \$500 to \$4,000, depending on size and subject matter. His clients are usually serious art collectors, some of whom are executives.

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“One gentleman runs a company in New Jersey and I’ve been putting together pieces that aren’t sold, maybe 40 pieces, and I’m going to send him digital images,” he said.

Reaching signature member status in the American Watercolor Society and National Watercolor Society, said Willis, takes natural talent but also a lot of devotion.

“I really believe you’re pretty much born this way,” he said. “I think you have to have the ability first and then keep doing it. Keep pursuing it.”

See more work by Willis at facebook.com/hdeanwilliswatercolors/.