

Don Howard's art lights up many eyes

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Ask artist Don Howard about the first piece he sold, and his eyes light up. He recounts the story in great detail as if it happened yesterday, not 40-plus years ago in Denison, Texas.

The father of a friend in the sixth grade - "she lived across the tracks" - wanted someone to paint "Giddy Up and Go" on his bass boat. Howard eagerly obliged. His payment for a full day's work? A huge barbecue sandwich for lunch, and then the friend's dad "pulled out the biggest, crispest \$10 bill I had ever seen. I was awestruck."

Ask Howard about his current project, and his eyes light up again. He recounts in great detail how he and his wife, Dorothy, are working on the "complete, unadulterated, illustrated version" of Samson and Delilah. He talks excitedly about plans for a book, action figures, even a TV program: "We've become a multimedia company."

To trace Howard's progression from painting a bass boat in Texas to illustrating biblical stories from his studio in Huntsville, you need to make several stops in small Southern towns during the height of the civil rights movement. Then you head to Hampton University in Virginia, where he played football on scholarship and drew caricatures for spending money. Then you need to strike out west to Hollywood, where he began a long career with the world's premier entertainment company, Disney. Your last stop is Huntsville, where Howard moved in the 1980s to help care for his ailing mother and eventually launched Howard Studios Ltd.

Along the way, he's made many friends but burned a few bridges, won prestigious contests but struggled financially for a time, never stopped learning new skills but always devoted eight to 10 hours a day to drawing.

Business Editor Steve Byers spoke with Howard, 56, recently in his northwest Huntsville home, surrounded by much of his original artwork. The conversation has been edited for space and clarity.

Working for Disney right out of college? That must've been scary and thrilling at the same time.

My eyes were as big as half-dollars when I got out there, because I had been a poor college student, and now I was in probably the best-known company for art in the world. Couple that, too, with being in the fairyland that was Los Angeles at that time, in the early '70s, and it was quite an experience. It took me about two or three years before I could blink.

You acknowledge that your skin color helped you land the job. Did you ever doubt your talent?

I never doubted the talent, but more important, I never doubted my socialization skills. I had that all my life, and I thank my father for that, because of his being in the service and the socialization that I had with all kinds of people. Our family basically integrated two Southern high schools, to the point where we were probably the only black family, or maybe one of two, in the schools. But we were prepared by my parents.

What did the experience at Disney mean to you?

First of all, it gets me five minutes with anybody. Second, the level of professionalism there prepared me, and I try to bring that into dealing with my customers. For instance, I know what state of the art is, and I've been around other professionals who are considered the best in the world. When I started at Disney, I was looked at as a token, but because of my work ethic, the talent I had and a desire to do well and be accepted as a professional, I was able to develop my skills. I still use the work habits I learned at Disney.

When did you first realize you had a talent for drawing?

I'm a pretty spiritual person, and I believe that it is a gift from God. But I guess you could say I was a child prodigy, because I could draw on a very, very high level at a very early age.

I'll give you an interesting story. When I lived in Ozark, there was an art contest in the next city over, Enterprise. Now, up to that time, I hadn't had any formal training. I was the only black person to enter. I think I entered a watercolor, a pen and ink, and an oil. I won all three categories. When I went to pick up the prize and ribbons, the lady who was kind of the curator of the place asked me, 'What schools did you train at?' I said, 'Ma'am, I haven't had any formal art training.' She said, 'You're lying.' Her tone told me she really felt that I was lying to her.

You're best known for your caricatures. Where did that start?

I always had an interest in caricature. I used to do caricatures while I was at Hampton, but I also used to go to William & Mary and Howard University and do them. I made the circuit. When I launched Howard Studios, I was making personal appearances all over Huntsville for corporations. I started at \$50 an hour, two hours minimum. Until I stopped doing personal appearances about a year ago, I had gotten it up to \$150 an hour, three hours minimum, and all the tips you could give me. With the advent of the Internet, the caricature business was put on steroids.

What's the most lucrative part of your business now?

It's twofold: One part is the Internet business, but only about 20 to 30 percent (of the sales) come from this area. In this area, working as a muralist has been very lucrative. I've done several restaurants, a civic work like the Iceplex, which has one of the largest murals in the state, and I've done whole churches from floor to ceiling.

How does one get into mural work? I'm sure once you establish a name, it's through word of mouth. But how do you land that first job?

I'd like to make this statement for all those aspiring artists wondering that same question: Donate it. Donate your time and services. Because what you will receive back from having a piece of art people can view is going to be other work, and not only that, you'll establish your reputation as somebody who is willing to do it. An artist has to never be afraid to do the work. Doing the work itself is its own benefit.

Speaking of advice and lessons learned, what's the biggest mistake you made as you grew and established a name in this business?

The biggest single mistake I've made, living in an area I was going to be in the rest of my life, was that I burned bridges. You can't let the arrogance of youth and talent - a person who is talented has to have a certain arrogance - burn a bridge you are going to have to cross later. Take a deep breath and ask, 'How is it going to benefit me to have a relationship with this person or company? Or, how is it going to be detrimental to my career if I don't have a good relationship?'

Because you do a lot of work for businesses, do your peers consider you a sellout?

There are artists who are not businessmen, and there are businessmen who don't have any artistic ability. I am an artist who through trials and tribulations has become a businessman. For instance, I have a meeting tomorrow with a company that wants me to design a character they will eventually animate, and it will be sold to people all across the country to use for advertising purposes. They have said, 'This is kind of what we want.' Now I could take it personally and say, 'Look, go ahead and do it. You don't need me.' You can't look at it that way. You have to say, 'This is a customer that is going to pay me good money. I am going to be doing something that all my colleagues wish they were doing. I'm going to have a personal relationship with a company that will probably grow into maybe 10 times this much in business over a year.' I don't think that anybody's a sellout if he can take his natural talent and what he loves and get paid for doing it.

What's the most expensive artwork you've sold?

We have fees for murals that regularly go into the \$15,000 to \$20,000 area. As far as caricatures, I sold one to the Richard Pryor family for around \$2,500. We've gotten our fees to the point where we can do well and probably have about a year's worth of bookings, and it still gives me time to work on our own projects. But the big thing financially is the small caricature that we print and send out. That's a numbers game. If you sell them for, say, \$15 each and get \$4 more for shipping and handling, and you sell several thousand of them, it adds up. I've always said that I would rather make \$100,000 off of 100 customers than make it off of one, because he owns you then.