

15 MINUTES

Art's difficult road

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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With a charcoal pencil on artist's paper, Gary Harness drew a huge yacht he could see outside his window. Besides drawing, he doesn't do too much else at his apartment in downtown Fort Myers, least of all decorate. The walls are empty and white, and it smells like the Poker cigarettes he smokes. But it's a great view, looking out over the river.

For as long as he can remember, Mr. Harness has dreamed that being a professional artist would fulfill him. That desire, more than love or money, has followed him throughout his life like a loyal, but sometimes troublesome dog.

It's why he moved to Fort Myers. It's also why he endured divorce, ugly jobs and even homelessness.

"I did it to perpetuate the art," he kept saying.

On a bar napkin he keeps around his apartment, he had scrawled a quote taken out of context from a newspaper. He believes it expresses his own thoughts well:

"When we activate our potential, then we share who we are, and the world will look a lot differently than it does now. We'll begin to live in a society in which creativity and beauty will flower and the evolution of one's soul will be why we are."

Who could argue with that?

After Mr. Harness moved to Fort Myers

in 2006, he stayed at a rooming house for a while, where he produced drawings of two children who were there. Other times he was on the street. He has often expressed regret for the way he left Kansas City, Mo., near his hometown. He mentioned legal troubles and physical ailments, but had a hard time going into details. He feels that he abandoned a close friend there.

"The way I left Kansas City, it was more like survival," he said. "The only honorable thing was to leave, and it took about five Greyhound buses to get here."

In early 2007, his disability checks started coming in and he moved to a building owned by the Housing Authority in downtown, Royal Palm Towers.

"I probably should have focused on getting on my feet," he said.

Instead, he spent the days trying to get freelance work doing sketches or posters. He was partially successful. One of his pieces was a mural for Scott's WesPak Meats on Edison Avenue. Another was a poster for a thrift store across the street.

Mr. Harness likes to sit in bars downtown like City Tavern and the Indigo Room, drawing people and objects. He also drew the bartender at the Misco Lounge off Cleveland Avenue.

"It's been two steps forward, four steps back," he said about his life, exhaling a stream of smoke toward the window. His mind leapt back and forth through history, trying to explain. Some details were clearer than others.

Mr. Harness, 55, was honorably dis-



Gary Harness

COURTESY PHOTO

said it felt like being stung by a swarm of bees.

His first marriage ended in divorce when he refused to leave Jacksonville to go back to his ex-wife's hometown in North Carolina. He had been doing some illustrations that ended up on posters in Jacksonville and in at least one case on television, he said. He didn't want to jeopardize the artistic opportunities that had begun to appear.

"I wanted to keep that alive," he said. "It was like burning energy that would never stop."

Then another love came along. On his daily bus ride to work he met a Mexican woman named Tajuana. After they started dating and at her urging, Mr. Harness put together a portfolio of 50 drawings and watercolors so he could apply for a job as a background artist for Disney Feature Animation in Burbank, Calif. The job didn't work out though, and the couple split up.

"We were madly in love with each other, but I think it was the stress," Mr. Harness said. "It was a combination of the work I was doing with hazardous chemicals, and trying to be an artist at the same time. We were both coming off a divorce. It just got to be too much."

He added, "Perhaps the alcohol was a factor. I wish I could have curtailed that more."

Later, he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder by a doctor in Leavenworth, Kan. He can't pinpoint the exact cause of his stress.

"It's a little foggy in places," he said.

But for all the things he's given up, his desire to make his living as an artist remains relentless. ■

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