

Down to the Last Detail

Enterprise Artist Inspires Nature Lovers, Sports Fans With Intricate Drawings

Ask Stephen Malkoff about his recipe for success, and he might tell you it's a little procrastination, a 45-pound weight to the foot, a chance encounter with a stranger, 10 years' worth of hot dog suppers and a whole lot of love. He'd of course recognize that this would need a little explaining.

Dubbed "The Tree Man" by Southern Living magazine because of his remarkable drawings of notable trees, the Enterprise native has also become known for his drawings of college mascots and stadiums.

One glance at his work and it's easy to see that Stephen is a gifted artist. He says being an artist was God's plan for his life, but he'd probably be a woodworker now if he'd had his way as a 12-year-old. Thanks to a little procrastination, he found his calling.

"In the seventh grade I wanted to get into woodshop class," he said. "That sounded really exciting to me. But I procrastinated and turned my schedule in a day late. Woodshop had filled up, and the only class left open was art."

Stephen had never tried to draw before, but says he took to the class like a fish to water. For his first assignment, an ebony pencil sketch of a light on crumpled paper, his teacher asked the class to "draw what they see." Stephen realized he could see every detail clearly and was able to draw it with ease.

"I didn't learn to draw," Stephen said. "God gave me the ability — I just had to discover it."

Love Hurts

Dreaming of becoming a full-time artist but not seeing art's potential as a profession, Stephen enrolled at Auburn University to study architecture. When he wasn't focused on his coursework, he was suiting up for football.



Stephen Malkoff's drawing of the Ole Oak in Geneva, Ala., was a gift to his wife, Lori, on their first anniversary, in his "starving artist" days. Now lauded for his detailed drawings of historic trees, the artist has branched out to college mascots and stadiums.

A walk-on, Stephen played linebacker for the Auburn Tigers, including on the 1988 Southeastern Conference (SEC) championship team that advanced to the Sugar Bowl.

Staying fit was naturally a priority for the athlete, and one day while home from college, Stephen spotted a beautiful girl working out at a local gym. While trying to impress her, he dropped a 45-pound weight on his foot.

"She was like my angel," he says of the girl who rushed to his rescue. Stephen and his angel, Lori, fell in love and were married.

Lori fully supported his dream to become an artist, working as a dental hygienist and selling her brand-new car to invest in his business. In 1990, Stephen's dream became a reality.

"That's part of the beauty of how I got started — I married a girl who believed in me," Stephen said. "I don't think I would

have made it as an artist if I hadn't married Lori."

Three children and two grandchildren later, Lori is still his angel. It is perhaps his love for her and a little divine intervention that gave Stephen his big break.

"Drawn Out of Love"

Stephen says the term "starving artist" was an apt description during the early years of their marriage. He wanted to give Lori something special for their first wedding anniversary but had no money, just creativity.

He drew one of the couples' favorite Wiregrass landmarks — the Ole Oak, a majestic live oak on the bank where the Choctawhatchee and Pea rivers merge in Geneva, Ala.

"I thought, 'You know what, God gave me this gift, so I'm going to draw the tree for her as a gift,'" Stephen said. "Drawing a tree out of love actually turned into



Ole Oak
Geneva, Alabama

a profession, because as people saw my drawing, I started getting all these phone calls about all these other trees that were historically significant.”

He’s gone on to draw the Angel Oak of Charleston, S.C., the Majestic Oak of Savannah, Ga., and the John F. Kennedy Oak of Arlington National Cemetery, just to name a few.

Reaping the Harvest

It was the Treaty Oak of Jacksonville, Fla., that led Stephen to the chance encounter that would leave a lasting impact.

Stephen describes it as a magnificent old live oak with branches that sweep down to the banks of the St. Johns River. Because the tree is a popular destination for natives and tourists alike, he thought his drawing was bound to be a huge success.

But it wasn’t, at least not initially. To market his Treaty Oak drawing, Stephen called on businesses and passed out flyers on what he says was the “meanest street” in Jacksonville. He was kicked out of multiple offices before having one of those pivotal moments in life.

“If anybody would have been watching me, they would have thought I was crazy,” Stephen said. “But I looked up to the sky and said, ‘Lord, I know you have not given

me this gift to waste, and if you have called me to be an artist, I need a miracle.”

Right after that, a stranger tapped him on the shoulder and asked how much he was charging for the Treaty Oak prints he was carrying. The gentleman paid above and beyond the asking price, then said he had a message specifically for the artist.

Taken aback, Stephen listened carefully to the stranger’s words: “You have been sowing seeds for 10 years, and you are about to reap a harvest.”

That was in 2000, exactly 10 years since Stephen had started his business. Moved by the stranger’s message, Stephen asked for his name and phone number. The man scratched the name “Scott” and a 10-digit number onto a piece of paper.

Stephen immediately called his wife about the mysterious message: “Lori, I know this was real — I felt it in my bones.”

Back at home the next morning, he received a phone call from yet another stranger — Red Underhill, a gentleman Stephen described as a “country fella” from Tennessee who had read about him in a local paper. After a casual exchange, Red asked a question that would forever change Stephen’s life.

“How would you like to be in Southern Living magazine?” Red asked, to which

Stephen responded as any starving artist would, “Are you kidding me?”

Stephen was interviewed two days later and would soon be known to Southern Living readers as “The Tree Man.”

Remembering the stranger in Jacksonville, Stephen picked up the phone to share his good news with Scott, only to hear the three-tone chime of a disconnected number.

Some may say it was an ironic turn of events, but Stephen believes it was something much greater.

“We’ll Keep Eating Hot Dogs . . .”

Just as the stranger had foretold, the Southern Living article initiated a harvest of success for Stephen. People began placing orders for existing work, commissioning custom work and visiting his studio in Enterprise. With the new marketing boost, he had become the renowned artist he’d dreamed he’d be.

Sometimes called the nation’s leading arboreal artist, Stephen recently tackled something new.

He describes college football as part of the culture of the South, where there is a huge appetite for collegiate memorabilia. He has officially licensed drawings and prints for Troy University and most SEC universities.



Despite Stephen's Auburn University roots, his artwork knows no bias. His subjects include the iconic University of Florida "the Swamp" stadium, University of Georgia Uga X bulldog, University of South Carolina Sir Big Spur gamecock, Troy University Trojan warrior, and Auburn University eagles Nova and Tiger. A drawing of the University of Alabama elephant is appropriately titled "Walk of a Champion."

Despite his love of football, Stephen's favorite drawing is the one he did out of his love for Lori, the Ole Oak in Geneva. It is one of the few originals he's kept, despite one great offer.

"I actually had a guy offer me \$10,000 back when we were starving and I wanted to sell it. But Lori said, 'We'll keep eating hot dogs, but you're not selling my original,'" Stephen said with a laugh.

A Quiet Place in the Country

With his attention to even the most minor detail, it takes Stephen three to six months to complete a piece. He spends three days a week drawing and the other days marketing his work. And when he's not busy with his artwork, he and his family enjoy time outdoors.

He's got his own piece of paradise, thanks in part to Alabama Ag Credit.

"Stephen has real talent, and we proudly feature some of his work in our office," said Lee Hughes, branch manager in Enterprise. "We're glad to call him a friend and to help provide a quiet place in the country for him and his family."

Those interested in learning more about Stephen Malkoff's work can visit his gallery at 110 N. Main St. in Enterprise, contact him at (888) 410-3559 or visit his website, malkoffgallery.com.



Todd and Jessica Grant of Jack, Ala., were one of two couples who attended the Alabama Council of Cooperatives' annual couples conference this summer on behalf of Alabama Ag Credit.



Andrew and Heather Roberts of Abbeville, Ala., also attended the conference, where they learned about cooperatives from educational seminars and networking opportunities with other co-op members.

CUSTOMERS LEARN ABOUT CO-OPS AT COUPLES CONFERENCE

Alabama Ag Credit was pleased to sponsor Todd and Jessica Grant of Jack, Ala., and Andrew and Heather Roberts of Abbeville, Ala., to attend the Alabama Council of Cooperatives' 41st annual Co-op Couples Conference.

The association's customers were among 25 couples who attended this year's conference, held July 18-20 in Orange Beach, Ala.

Through the support of member organizations like Alabama Ag Credit, the council's conference educates attendees about the impact cooperatives have on their everyday lives. The event features educational seminars on a variety of cooperatives and fosters networking opportunities for co-op members.

Andy Grant, branch manager of Alabama Ag Credit's Gulf Coast office in Spanish Fort, serves on the council's board and helps organize the conference each year.

"The relaxed and fun setting of this conference provides an excellent opportunity for us to thank our members for their business while they're learning more about cooperatives," he said. "We're proud to have had the opportunity to host the Grants and the Roberts at this year's Co-op Couples Conference. They are ideal examples of our valued customers."

Help Us Welcome New Staff



Alabama Ag Credit recently welcomed **Christi Grant** as office administrator in the Demopolis office. Christi recently earned a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in accounting from The University of West Alabama. She comes to us from Regions Bank, where she was a teller. She and her husband, Stephen, reside in Gallion.