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Timm Eppers's art supply case is an antique sample box he found at a sidewalk sale in McHenry.



THE ARTISTIC JOURNEY OF

Yummy Sitters

BY LISA ARNETT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLIVIA KOHLER

When you're looking at one of Timm Etters's airbrushed murals, you might first notice the brilliant color, the captivating dimension, or even just its sheer size.

"They are just striking. It's like they reach out to you," says Joan Mills, art teacher at Fry Elementary School in Naperville. "The colors are just so vibrant, and the contrast is just beautifully done. It's obviously realism, but it also has that sense of otherworldliness to it."

Etters, 49, of Volo, in Lake County, has painted hundreds of murals in local schools over the last three decades, but his influence extends beyond the walls of those gyms, hallways, and cafeterias. Through his artist-in-residence program, he has shared his inspiring story of overcoming obstacles and starting his own art business as a teen.

LIVING IN COLOR

Etters was in third grade when he discovered he was colorblind. An art teacher noticed he was struggling with colors and took him to the school nurse for a vision test. "I remember being pretty devastated," Etters says. "I was like, 'All I want to do is be an artist, and now I'm not going to be able to.'" The teacher suggested focusing on pencil drawing, and Etters took that advice to heart. "So from third grade all through high school, I drew and drew and drew. Every day," he says.

At Cary-Grove High School, a budding love for hip-hop and graffiti inspired him to bring color back into his work. Then everything came to a standstill when, after a freak accident slipping in the bathtub, a doctor discovered he had stage 4 testicular cancer. To give himself something to look forward to during recovery, Etters started his own art business selling fellow students hand-drawn portraits and custom T-shirts painted with an airbrush he bought with money from his get-well cards.

Though the airbrush still remains Etters's chosen tool, it was spray paint that inadvertently introduced him to school murals in 1985. After he was found responsible for marking a bridge with graffiti—an elaborate memorial to Vietnam veterans—the police officer, who was a vet himself, was so touched he gave Etters a creative punishment: 132 hours of community service painting a mural in his high school's cafeteria.

SPEAKING TO STUDENTS

Etters offers an artist-in-residence program for schools in which he speaks about his life story in an assembly-style presentation that includes artwork from his grade school years. "It's more directly relatable, rather than just showing them my [professional] work ... and having them look it and say, 'I could never do that,'" Etters says. "I kind of bring it down a few notches so they can really plug into it and say, 'I can totally do this.'"

A VAST BODY OF WORK

"I love how he gets emotionally tied to his work," says Michele Frost, who met Timm Etters while working at Naperville Central High School and is now principal at Patterson Elementary. "I feel like almost any artist could come in and draw a picture of whatever you ask of him, but he just has that emotional component that just moves people." Listed below are a few of Etters's most memorable mural projects at schools in the western suburbs; see them at timmatters.com.

No. 81

1993 Naperville Central's mascot transition from Redskins to Redhawks was welcomed by some and fraught for others, says Frost. Etters was involved with the new mascot design and painted several murals. "It was almost like the murals helped people heal ... at the time. It was just what we needed," Frost says.

No. 141

1996 A Patriots mural adorns the gymnasium of Jefferson Junior High School in Naperville.

No. 169

1998 As a class gift, the class of 1999 at Waubonsie Valley High School in Aurora commissioned a three-story mural in memory of a three students killed by a drunk driver during homecoming festivities. "It's a female warrior and ... it had all these symbols in there: three shooting stars, three teepees," Frost says. "It's just so moving to look at it."

No. 206

2000 A Wall of Fame mural at Wheaton Warrenville South High School in Wheaton features famous alumni, such as Jim Belushi.

No. 221

2002 A mural featuring James H. Monroe Middle School's namesake and

mascot is near the front entrance of the Wheaton junior high.

No. 227

2003 A mascot mural resides in the gym of Glenbard East High School in Lombard, home of the Rams.

No. 244

2004 Etters painted an elaborate ceiling mural at Waubonsie Valley High School in Aurora.

No. 273

2008 A Gators mascot mural resides in the multipurpose room at Gombert Elementary School in Aurora.

No. 282

2010 Etters started a multiyear project in collaboration with local organizations Century Walk and Kids Matter to decorate the Van Buren Avenue parking deck in downtown Naperville with murals for five area high schools (Naperville Central, Naperville North, Neuqua Valley, Waubonsie Valley, and Metea Valley), painted with students.

2018 and beyond

Upcoming school projects for Etters include finishing the Van Buren Avenue parking deck walls and painting new murals for Still Middle School in Aurora and Jerling Junior High School in Orland Park.



This mural at Waubonsie Valley High School is one of hundreds in the area painted by Timm Etters.

"The message he really gives is: Follow your passion and never give up—which is one we want our kids to hear and engage with," says Tracy Dvorchak, a former principal at Prairie Elementary School who is currently at the helm of Naper Elementary School. Etters created a new logo for Prairie and completed an artist-in-residence program with the students prior to painting a mural in their gym five years ago.

Students also try out Etters's airbrush tools. "They get to ... paint their names up on a banner in different colors," Etters says. "If there's a school of 800 kids, then there's 800 names in different colors and it looks like modern art ... like a graffiti version of Jackson Pollock."

Etters paints his murals while school is in session, rather than after hours or during school breaks. "We actually held PE right while he was doing it," Dvorchak says. "He's just over on the side, up on his scaffolding, and all the kids got to see him in action ... and see the progress going along." Because of the artist-in-residence program, Dvorchak says, "they had an understanding of how he did his work and they felt really connected to him."

FORGING AHEAD

In recent years, health hurdles—depression, an injured tendon in his drawing arm, and spinal stenosis—have made the already physically demanding task of mural painting increasingly difficult for Etters. "There are days when it takes me two or three hours to get going in the morning ... but I can work once I get going; it's just harder," he says. "It's the kind of thing that's never really been talked about, that people have often wondered about: 'Why doesn't Timm get here at 8 in the

morning?' or 'Why doesn't he have a regular schedule?' ... I hope it encourages other people that, you know, you're going to have struggles, setbacks, and roadblocks."

And his colorblindness? Etters has a number of strategies to overcome his vision limitations during mural painting. "One of those strategies is named Vicki," he says, referring to his wife. "I can call her during the day at work and I'll send her a picture and I'll say, 'What color is this?' And she won't say 'red' or 'blue,' she will say specific shades of red or blue that I will identify with." Etters also uses technology to help, such as a Sherwin Williams color-matching app and Photoshop's eyedropper tool. "There are times when I've built a relationship with kids [at the school I'm working at] where I can trust them. They know I'm colorblind and I'll say, 'Hey, in your best description, what color is this?' And they'll tell me or even help me mix it. It becomes a cool connection."

Etters's lifelong goal is to paint as many murals as Norman Rockwell painted *Saturday Evening Post* covers (see sidebar). "He's one of my favorite painters," Etters says. "He worked [there] for 43 years and painted, I think, 322 *Post* covers. ... which meant, for me, that 323 would be where I could sit down and say, 'I did it.'"

To date, Etters has completed 310 murals and has a six-month-long wait list for future projects. Somewhere around mural 307, he had an interaction with a student that he says he will never forget. "I had just finished a presentation at a school and, health-wise, I was really struggling," he says. "This little girl comes up to me and ... she says, 'Mr. Etters, you only have 16 murals to go. You can do this!'" he says. "I was like, oh my gosh. I'm not going to let her down." ●