

LIFESTYLE

Harwood's celebrity artist

By MITCHELLE STEPHENSON for
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Michael Bell has been quietly teaching art in Harwood for about 14 years. Mr. Bell has nurtured hundreds of south county high school students through his fine arts program at the school.

Few would guess the 2004 Anne Arundel County Teacher of the Year leads a parallel life - painting portraits for the likes of alleged mob boss John Gotti and "Sopranos" actors Joseph Gannascoli (Vito Spatafore) and Tony Sirico (Paulie Gualtieri). And his fine arts paintings hang in established galleries in New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago.



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While his series of paintings, "Ticket to Ride," tells the story of a day in the life of a woman on a subway, Michael Bell spends much of his time far from the subway teaching art in rural southern Anne Arundel County.

In fact, if you Google his name, the search results deliver "celebrity artist Michael Bell."

Mr. Bell admits that he travels in some pretty unusual circles. He has done work with Denise Brown, sister to Nicole Brown Simpson, the slain ex-wife of O.J. Simpson. And he was featured regularly with New York actors and artists on a weekly talk radio show based in New York City.

When asked how he came to be involved with so many celebrities in New York when his day-to-day life is centered around teaching high school students some 200 miles away in Harwood, Mr. Bell said, "it's just a bunch of guys from the old neighborhood." He's actually a native of New Jersey.

Mr. Bell has no plans to relocate.

He says he likes his life here. He and his wife bought a house and have a 1-year-old son. He likes teaching.

But he does go back to New York City every couple of weeks to unveil a painting or work on a charity event, or meet with a client about a commission.

Mr. Bell recently donated one of his oil-on-wood panels for a children's charity, Bright Steps Forward. The nonprofit group provides funding to give intensive pediatric therapy to children suffering from a host of neurological disorders like cerebral palsy, autism and other conditions that affect physical functioning. He also headed a table at the fundraising dinner for the group on Sept. 16 on Staten Island.

It all started last year, when Mr. Bell unveiled three in a series of paintings, "Ticket to Ride," at The Plumm in New York City's meatpacking district - the new celebrity hot spot in the Big Apple. Mr. Gannascoli, who'd just been named the Bright Steps Forward spokesman, came to the opening with the two women who started the charity. Mr. Bell met with the three of them and became involved in their fundraising by agreeing to head a table at their September event.

The fundraiser worked like this: there were dozens of tables headed by celebrities. Patrons bought tickets to sit with their favorite celebrity. Tony Plato, the actor who plays Betty's father in the ABC show "Ugly Betty," headed a table. Dominic Chianese, the actor who played Johnny Ola in the Godfather movies, was also heading a table as were Giants football stars Sam Madison and Otis Anderson.

Mr. Bell also hosted a table. "Some of my followers sat with me," he said modestly, not mentioning that those followers paid for that privilege.

The charity raised more than \$150,000. In addition, Mr. Bell unveiled the painting he donated to the cause, "Lucas and Joe," a portrait of Mr. Gannascoli and Lucas de Olivera, the son of Bright Steps Forward founder Eileen de Olivera.

The painting will hang in the lobby of the group's new Staten Island headquarters.

Mr. Bell typically does his large fine arts paintings in a series, designed to tell a story. The series "Ticket to Ride" tells the story of a day in the life of a woman on a subway. Each painting depicts a scene of "things that happen to her along the way," according to Mr. Bell. There are nine paintings in this series, each a large 5-by-5-foot-square canvas. Each sells for \$50,000.

He got a great reception on the concept at the opening at the Plumm, and the series has turned into the storyboard for a movie. There is now a screenplay, and Mr. Bell is looking for backers before casting and filming can get underway.

A few years back he worked with a gallery in Chicago to do a series of paintings, "The Seven Deadly Sins in Chocolate." Next, he'll be revisiting the theme with the "Heavenly Virtues in White Chocolate."

Locals haven't been totally left out by Mr. Bell. A few years back he painted the official portrait of Nancy Grasmick, president of the Maryland Board of Education, which now hangs in the Board of Education building in Baltimore.

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