

# AREA NEWS

## Painting Missouri on the map

### Artist travels state to capture local landmarks

By JENNIFER COOMBS  
STAFF WRITER

Billyo O'Donnell lit up the face of at least one Sherwood student last Thursday when he stopped by Darla Zook's art class to talk about painting.

Billyo, as O'Donnell likes to be called, is a nationally known painter who is currently involved in a project with journalist Karen Glines called Painting Missouri. Billyo and Glines will be creating a book featuring Billyo's paintings of the scenic state of Missouri. Glines will be accompanying the works with Missouri inspired essays.

As founder of the "Artists Along the Katy Trail," an event where artists gather along the trail and paint what they see, as well as socialize with other artists in their field, Billyo is making strides to put the state of Missouri on the map in brighter, more attractive colors.

"I was paid to paint in Tuscany," said Billyo, "and I could not believe how much it resembled this area. I was really surprised to meet a man who was from Missouri and he said to me that Tuscany often reminded him of Missouri. I couldn't believe it."

It is no wonder his design was picked for the Missouri license plate. Billyo has spent a large amount of his career sitting outside on Missouri hills painting. A native of Warrenton who resides in Eureka, Billyo said he finds Missouri's beauty heavily influenced in some of the works of highly acclaimed artists who are from the state but reside on the East and West coasts. Billyo said

his strong love and respect for the state have led him to stay despite several career opportunities in the coastal regions.

"I cannot get too many people out here interested in my landscapes," said Billyo. "I'm not sure why there isn't a market for it, but

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Billyo O'Donnell, artist

outside of the Midwest there is a huge market for my type of work. I have decided to stay here. I think this is one of the most beautiful places in the world. I am going to bring art to Missouri and I want to encourage other artists to stay here and do the same."

Billyo has and will continue traveling to all 115 counties in the state of Missouri to paint plain air landscapes, or landscapes created in the outdoors at the location and time of the painting. Billyo said he has been to nearly all of the counties in the state at least once and was visiting last week to start work representational of Cass County.

As Billyo painted Sherwood student Justin Geiser, Zook's students gathered around him to ask questions, listen and quietly watch. Billyo explained the steps he took to become a successful painter and demonstrated his own techniques as he created a likeness of Geiser under dimmed

lights. Encouraged to relax, Geiser slumped for two hours on a backless stool as Billyo mixed colors and squinted his eyes.

The relaxed session gave many students a chance to find encouragement in a profession that can be brutal at times.

"You should never feel like you don't have something to offer to the field," said Billyo after a student questioned whether she had anything new to add to a field

where all forms of art had already been done. "I think this is the greatest time for art. Many things have been done and that is why now there is no one genre that people are stuck on. You can do anything. You can mix genres. This is a wonderful time to be an artist. I would not be afraid to try anything. What is important is that you show others what you see and how you see it."

Billyo started out attending East Central Community College in Springfield and eventually moved on to receive a degree in art from Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield.

After working as an illustrator for a motivational company called Maritz, Billyo gained the recognition of several companies such as Nissan. It was after working with Nissan that Billyo was discovered, as he says, "almost by accident" by several California art galleries including Joan Irvine Smith Fine Arts Inc, which has



Democrat-Missourian photo by Jennifer Coombs  
Above: Justin Geiser, a student at Sherwood High School, posed for Billyo O'Donnell during Darla Zook's art class. O'Donnell set up lights and painted Geiser while he talked with Zook's students. At this point, O'Donnell took a break to discuss his progress with the students. Below: O'Donnell paints while speaking with students about his love for Missouri and his new project, a book with Missouri journalist Karen Glines.

been showcasing his work in Laguna Beach with much success.

"It is not always easy," said Billyo. "I have been lucky enough to make a living at this. I know several other wonderful and talented artists who are not as lucky as me. With the economy like it is, I have one friend who is working in construction just to get by."

Because Billyo is a plein air painter, the same environment that provides him with inspiration can be his nemesis. Sporting alternate gear for whatever season may be in full swing, Billyo said the great outdoors is not always as soothing as his paintings. An example of this is a painting he has

kept that is full of bugs. Instead of scraping the hundreds of bugs off and starting over, Billyo varnished them on to prove his point.

Weather conditions aside, Billyo said his passion for painting and his love for the Missouri landscape have allowed him to pursue a fulfilling life that allows him to express himself.

"Whenever I am painting, I am constantly working with my instincts and expressing what I see and how it inspires me at the moment," said Billyo. "I could not think of a better way to spend my time."

To view additional work accom-

panied by stories and journals explaining Billyo's experience at the time of painting, visit his Web site at [www.billyoart.com](http://www.billyoart.com). Billyo is also asking Missourians to share stories from their area and sites in their community that they believe might be significant to his book "Painting Missouri" by visiting [www.PaintingMissouri.com](http://www.PaintingMissouri.com) or sending mail to P.O. Box 31566, St. Louis, MO 63131-2038. Billyo will be updating PaintingMissouri.com as he completes work and has stories to tell about locations that could be near you.

To contact Jennifer Coombs, call 380-3228, ext. 2233.

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