



the arts

BY BOOTHE BLANTON FARLEY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAIRE CAMPBELL

firstlight

ARTS ACADEMY

The dream of Dennas Davis

THAT SAYING, “GOOD THINGS COME IN SMALL PACKAGES,” WE ALL FIND TO BE TRUE, ONCE IN A WHILE.

We see it over and over again at random intervals over the course of our lives, reminding us not to judge the exterior of something lest we miss the gem inside. As cliché as it may sound, there may not be a better way to describe newly founded Firstlight Arts Academy except to say that *extraordinary* things often happen in ordinary fashions.

Dennas Davis had to *do* something. As an illustrator who’s worked for countless publications and numerous projects – magazines, children’s books, advertisements, even album covers – he was well known, particularly for his work in a small (and well-published) book called *The Beginner’s Bible*. Many, many children in America – and around the world – have at least flipped through this chubby little collection of Bible stories, sometimes receiving their first exposure to them. And even for someone who hasn’t picked it up in, say, 20 years, the illustrations Davis rendered are memorable and warm.

So why would someone who’d had such a successful career in the arts need to do anything at all? What happened? Apparently, a lot of things.

“Illustration has been difficult in the last 10 years,” Davis says. “In a nutshell, there are several factors that have caused this problem: digitization, business models and legislation – and these have driven me towards a new step. I’m still an illustrator. In fact, I just finished working on a book, *What God Has Always Wanted*, and I’m working on another children’s book now. But I have added a new layer, a new project to what I am doing on a regular basis. One great thing about this is that I can work at Firstlight and still do children’s books and paintings professionally.”

Digitization makes sense – the Internet is wreaking havoc on many artistic communities, including visual artists – and, of course, business models, ever-changing and modernizing, make sense. But legislation?

In fact, there’s a bill currently pending in Congress called the Orphaned Works Act, in which writers, photographers, musicians, painters, sculptors and illustrators alike all face a looming governmental decision to divest them of their rights to use past work. There are a more details to it than that, but ultimately, the fear of losing control of the work he’s done in the past has made a significant impact on Davis. Suddenly, the idea of leaving a legacy has to do with a lot more than lines on a page.

Enter that notion about *good things coming in small packages*.

Davis had been participating in children’s ministry over the past few years at his



DENNAS DAVIS

home church, Grace Center, in Franklin. He was still doing some work in restaurants and churches around town (mostly with murals) and, as that wrapped up, it struck him that he really wanted to do something else.

“I finished [the projects I’d been working on] and ... as my wife was student-teaching, I got to go and spend time in the classroom with her [teaching art],” he says. “After about 45 minutes with those first graders, I realized I wanted to do something where I could influence kids. So I decided to start my own school.”

Davis says this with such nonchalance you would think the idea had been stirring in him for quite a while, but in reality, his calm is a result of the “domino effect” he says happened after he began talking with friends about his plans.

“Two days after I started thinking about the school, I met with a pastor from Grace Center, and he really encouraged me, even to think about using the space there,” Davis explains. “And during that lunch, someone who was looking to take art lessons called me. I’ve been in the phone book for 26 years, and no one has ever called me about that before.”

Grace Center, ironically, was already home to another school centered around fine arts – Worship in the Arts Dance School, to be exact. But Michael and Mary Cadle, the founders, had been praying for someone to come in and introduce visual arts as a part of their curriculum. Davis felt right at home joining forces with the Cadles.

“Worship in the Arts is very serious about dance,” he says. “You can go on to dance professionally if you train with them. It seemed like a great fit. We renamed the whole program Firstlight Arts Academy.”

The friends actually landed upon a verse in the Book of Matthew that inspired their choice: “... let your light shine before men that they may see your good deed and praise your Father in heaven.” (5:16). Davis quickly acknowledges that the good works they’re interested in, in this case, are works of art.

“Art can glorify God,” he says. “It should, in fact. The whole ‘first light’ concept comes from our belief that God is the ultimate creator, and because we are made in His image, we are all, in our own ways, creative. We have a deep desire to redeem the arts. Sometimes they’re handed over to a certain ‘end’ of culture [that most parents aren’t thrilled for their kids to be around].”

Firstlight opened its doors June 13, and, to Davis’ astonishment, there are 50 art students enrolled in various summer camps. The camps and classes – respectively occurring during the summer and the school year – are divided into three age groups: 5-7, 8-12, and 13 and up (including adults). At the moment, Davis is the sole teacher, focusing on drawing, painting and cartooning.

“This covers a whole lot of areas in art,” he says. “Painting (with oil pastels, chalk pastels and acrylics) and drawing (with charcoal, ink and pencil) are obviously popular, but a lot of kids

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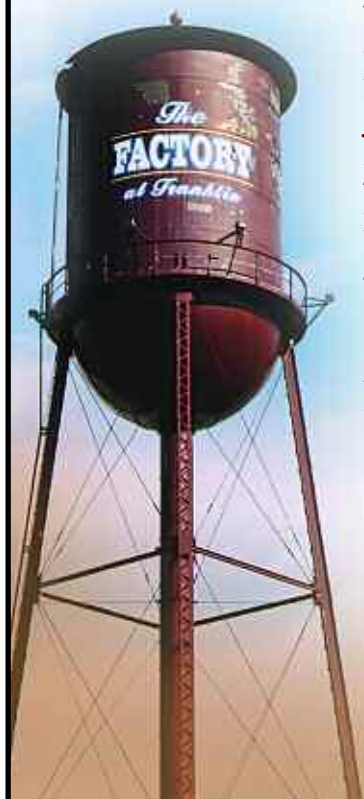
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want to know how to do cartooning. Art, in general, is about not steering someone in any direction [artistically]. Sometimes, I give kids half a real face and ask them to draw in the rest, in whatever style they want. In everything I teach, I'm careful not to put my own art into their brains. Style is very personal."

And if there's anything unique about Firstlight, it's that the school is highly concerned with the idea of personal art – art that isn't taught but rather discovered. Davis recently conducted Color Camp, and the last thing he wanted to do was hand his students a color wheel.

"We spent the whole week mixing colors and learning how to create the colors we wanted," he says. "By the end – through doing it themselves – the kids knew how colors were formed, without ever being handed that information."

Kids get training in countless areas of interest growing up – be it baseball, soccer, basketball, gymnastics, cheerleading. But students of art usually don't become such until high school, or at best, middle school. Davis feels particularly compelled to fill a void in Williamson County and in the overall cultural aspect of arts.

"We're looking to start kids off young so that their talents will develop as they age," Davis says. "There are workshops and programs that occasionally pop up for the same reasons, but no schools [in this area]."

And, as is true for most schools, Firstlight wouldn't be where it is today without the help of a lot of different people, including Davis' own family.

"My children, Valeria and Evan, and my wife, Ruthie, have helped me immensely," he says. "Valeria even brought in her bunny rabbit for the kids in the cartooning camp to observe and draw from. One kid gave him a carrot and a cottontail, another a samurai sword. That's what's great about art."

What's great about Firstlight is that, ultimately, Davis wants it to be a place for students to tap into their own creativity, in whatever way that happens.

"I installed a good sound system in the classroom and ... while the kids are working, I crank it up," Davis explains. "I use the music for inspiration and to keep things interesting. I play a lot of different stuff – classical, jazz, rock, Enya, and various instrumentals. I also try to make sure that the music is joyful as well as clean. For the youngest kids, I have a lot of special kid music, like Disney.

"I invite parents into the rooms if they want... and I've had a few come in and say they really liked how the music works. They'll also pull out pads and draw sometimes." ☺

CONTACT THE SCHOOL

Firstlight Arts Academy
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www.dennasd.com/art

School Year Classes in drawing, painting and cartooning. From Kindergarten through adult. Home school early afternoon classes. After-school program classes. Open studio some evenings. Check the Web site for schedule and offerings.

Orphan Works information: www.illustratorspartnership.org.

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