Iberia's influence
Artist can't forget home

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— Schexnayder

By Lisa Hurt
Iberia Bureau writer

NEW IBERIA — Although he was living and working hundreds of miles from home, local artist Paul Schexnayder couldn't get New Iberia out of his head — and it shows in his paintings.

While teaching art class in Boston, Schexnayder painted the story of an older Cajun woman whose hair had turned yellow because she failed to marry in time — one of many Cajun tales that have been passed down through generations.

There is still evidence of New Iberia and its culture in many of Schexnayder's paintings, but moving back home "made me kind of forget about it," the 30-year-old artist said.

With that fleeting thought, came another idea — why not put together a series of artworks focusing on familiar characters of New Iberia?, Schexnayder wondered out loud.

And, so he will write a grant applying for funding for the project, which would include many well-known characters, such as an older black man known as "Check, Check, Double Check," who rode his bike all along New Iberia roadways.

"That sounds very exciting. I had kind of forgotten about some of these things, but now it's all a part of my life again," Schexnayder said.

Of course, completing such a series may take some time — especially since Schexnayder stays busy teaching art classes at Episcopal School of Acadiana (ESA) and Epiphany Day School, as well as working coop hours at the Left Bank Gallery, where some of his work is displayed, helping develop Bayou Teche Museum, and painting.

As an artist, Schexnayder feels he's finally developed his own style — he calls himself a contemporary folk artist.

"I'm not considered a true folk artist because I am trained in art, but my style certainly follows with folk art," the Louisiana State University graduate said.

Schexnayder, who never actually painted until he began college, uses primary colors and basic design elements to create paintings that "make people feel good," he said.

"I spent some time in Guatemala and the whole culture was a big influence on my work and my finding my own style," Schexnayder said. "You see how poor the people are, but yet their lives are so simple and happy."

"And, I thought, that's what I want my life to be — that's what makes you rich and successful," he said.

Being basically a cheerful, outgoing person, Schexnayder and wife Lee just celebrated their first anniversary.

"I'm not this dark and brooding person, who never talks and does these really dark paintings with hidden meanings," Schexnayder said. "I look at my art and it's like just throwing colors around with real basic meanings."

Then I feel like they're doing the real art, not me," he said.

That may be why the young artist finds it hard to imagine someone paying $400 for some of his work, much less $2,500.

"I had this one piece in a show and I didn't really want to sell it so I decided to put $400 on it so no one would buy it. But, they did — it was like, 'I can't believe they'd pay that much for something I created,'" he said.

Schexnayder is finally learning to get less possessive about his art.

"At first I didn't want to sell anything, it all meant something. Then I started rationalizing it and thinking — Okay, I know this person so I can go visit if I want. Then people from out-of-state started buying them and that's really bizarre for me to think there's a piece of me hanging on their wall in North Dakota," Schexnayder said.

There have been a lot of things Schexnayder discovered while developing himself as a new artist, one of those is to have a focus, that marketing is a big part of becoming financially successful as an artist, and that above all else, you have to paint for yourself.

Some of these lessons he learned with the help of a consultant who advised him when he decided to quit his job of four years in Boston and move to New Iberia to try to make a living as an artist.

Although Schexnayder must still maintain two part-time teaching jobs to help foot the bills, he dreams of a day when painting alone will be enough.

"I don't need to be wealthy, I just want to paint and make a living. I'm very rich right now in other senses. Lee and I are very comfortable and Orleans, Lafayette, New Iberia, Mississippi, and occasionally out of his Main Street home and studio.

Last year, Schexnayder had his second one-man art show in New Iberia. With the completion of his new idea for the series of local characters, Schexnayder hopes to plan another show, he said.

"There's so much about this culture and the people that fascinates me still. I'd like to be able to do a series like this that really reflects the area and brings back memories," he said.

Paul Schexnayder uses scenes from New Iberia's historical district in his latest project.

Photos by
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