Local artist learning the art of living

Former drifter counts his blessings; remembers not-so-good-old-days

By ED CULLEN
Advocate staff writer

They hadn't seen him at the downtown post office in a while. The manager of the cafe at the bus station said he'd been by the last couple of days and would likely reappear. "That's his work, hangin' up." The guys at Kinko's hadn't seen him in two days but guessed he'd be back for another press run, soon.

"I been busy," said Matthew Todd.

It's the next morning inside the cafe at the Trailways Bus Station on Convention Street. Todd, wearing black boots, a brown and white checked cowboy shirt, denim vest and jeans, is having coffee with an associate. Todd's half is shot with gray. He sports a salt-and-pepper mustache over an Ipana smile. The smile lacks only teeth. Todd is 43.

"I was doing that mural in Catfish Town, and I been trying to get out some seasonal stuff, greeting cards, prints, for Christmas. I'm doing a Cajun recipe book, too, with a guy I know."

Each morning, Todd walks the 12 blocks from O'Brien House, a halfway house for recovering alcoholics, to the river. Sitting by the river, he meditates a half hour. Then, he goes to work.

"The best thing about being sober is being able to enjoy what God put on this earth," Todd said. "When I was drinking, I didn't even know the birds were flying."

Todd has been sober about eight months. He spent two years roaming the country drunk before landing in Baton Rouge six years ago.

"Ten years ago, I was a drunk, a bad drunk. Somehow, in my migrations I ended up down here. I wouldn't trade my life today for a drink of liquor. I've got a choice, today, because of some good people in AA in this town."

Most of Todd's pen-and-ink drawings are the work of a good amateur. A few drawings show promise of better work to come. Todd doesn't concern himself much with art critics. His drawings, displayed in about 20 places around town, earn him a small income. A good week might bring $100.

"I consider myself lucky. There are a lot of people in Louisiana not making that kind of money, right now."

Todd guesses there are 150 "street people" in town. Word of Baton Rouge's hard times reached the road a long time ago.

"When things are bad and people are out of work, you don't have much luck when you walk up to a guy and ask him for change for coffee," Todd said.

Todd's work is priced to sell. Most of the prints (copies from Kinko's on good paper) sell for $10 or $15.

"There's a reason for that that might sound crazy to you," Todd said. "I think art is to be enjoyed. I like watching a young couple buy a couple of these for $10 a piece."

Todd is in his Louisiana period at the moment. "And I'm gonna stay in it."

He left a string of failed business ventures in Charleston, S.C., in 1979. His first marriage had just ended in divorce. He's been married twice since.

"I left Charleston after being drunk for 10 years," he said. "I started drinking when I was 12."

Todd hit the road — "just being a drunk." He took the drunk's tour of the United States and Mexico.

"The weather had nothing to do with where I went. One winter, I went north. Most of the places, I can't even tell you what they looked like. I went there drunk, stayed drunk and left drunk. That's a hell of a fluke. It's what you do to hold on to that matters. What I'm doing now pleases me. That's all that's important."

Todd does most of his work at a drawing table in his room at O'Brien House. He used to draw while sitting on the porch at the post office. The post office was his best sales location, too.

That was before postal inspectors ran him off, said.

"They ran me off the porch, but I just moved to the sidewalk. They went bananas. I don't know why they got so upset. Most of them guys bought my drawings."

Todd said he looked up one day to find postal inspectors looking down.

"It was real funny. One of 'em is telling me why I can't be there, and the other dude is saying, 'I'll take this one and this one and . . . Both them dudes got my stuff hanging in their houses, now."

Do drunks ever hit Todd up for change? "Sure, but if the guy's drunk I say, 'No. Now, if he's sick, I mean really needs a drink, yes. I also give him directions to Detox."

Some of Todd's best agents are drunks.

"One guy was actually making a living at it before he started drinking again."

The manager of Souper Salad at the corner of Florida and Riverside Mall confirms that he's offered Todd the small, vacant space next to the restaurant. Todd hopes to set up shop next week. The work of other artists will be shown as well, the restaurant manager said.

"There comes a time when you pick your ass up by the boot strings," Todd said. "I don't suffer delusions of grandeur anymore. I please myself. I'm happy. I could put my zoot suit on and go get myself a job like everyone else. Suit, tie, the silks, get back with the mad crowd."

I have as many suits as any man in Baton Rouge. Every once in a while, I put one on and go out. Go to a country-western place and listen to music. Next morning, I remember what I heard, too."

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Todds

Todd says he invented a security camera, that he studied art at the University of South Carolina, managed an exterminating company, held stock brokerage and insurance licenses and wrote a couple of hit, regional country songs. He understands people are skeptical when he lists his accomplishments.

"Probably, they don't believe a word of it. It doesn't matter. Anybody can have a fluke. It's what you do to hold on to it that matters. What I'm doing now pleases me. That's all that's important."