

No backup plan

Gillette artist forges his own path in finding global success

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Former Gillette resident and Campbell County High School graduate Gabe Leonard talks to a group of art students at CCHS on Feb. 3. Leonard with in town for a gallery showing at Wyoming Art and Frame.

News Record Photo/Steel Brooks

The first thing Gabe Leonard does with a new canvas is cover it up.

Stark white is quickly turned to a neutral base. He doesn't like the white. A blank canvas can intimidate an artist. Creating something from nothing can be that way.

Now 25 years into an art career, it's not as intimidating as it once was. Leonard only worries when there's something tangible to worry about, like going bankrupt or a homeless man puking on his prints (it's happened).

“It’s not performing heart surgery or fixing the brakes in a car,” Leonard said about painting. “I can always make changes as I go.”

If the painting has an emotional edge, an aggressive tone, he’ll throw on some Jack White while he paints. Any of the bands the Detroit rocker has been in usually does the trick.

If the piece is more subtle, Leonard will play something soothing, calming or reserved. It’s the difference between a hostile poker game or a damsel clinging to her man’s suit suspenders.

The music sets the tone.

One last thing usually runs through his head as he stares at the canvas, oils ready and warm, the music loud.

“I hope I don’t screw this one up,” he said.

So goes the life of artist Gabe Leonard.

Growing up

Leonard could draw at an exceptional level at an early age. In high school, he took a strong liking to Chris Amend, his art teacher at Campbell County High School.

“There was always something about Gabe,” Amend said, now more than two decades removed from teaching Leonard. “He was a gifted student. Hard worker, too.”

Art school was something Leonard had in the back of his mind for a while. He knew he wanted to continue with his passion of drawing and illustrating, but he worried about the practicality of making a career of his art.

After graduating from CCHS in 1994, he received a \$24,000 partial scholarship to Columbus College in Ohio. After getting his diploma, he packed up his car in 1998 and headed out to the West Coast.

“I learned what I was going to do in college, but had a feeling like I could make it out in California where the movie business was,” he said. “Theater was big there and I made a few connections from a short Disney program I was in.”

Leonard imagined himself painting and illustrating the backgrounds for animated films, “Fantasia”-esque features and stop-motion productions.

His first year in Los Angeles, he watched the DreamWorks movie "Antz."

The film, which was one of the first digitally animated films of its kind, was a death note to Leonard, the Grim Reaper knocking at the door of his hopeful career.

Sitting in the theater, he realized the world was going digital, that the industry he thought he had an edge in was leaving artists like him behind.

"I saw this career go out the window, just like that," he said.

That summer, he did two things that would eventually define both his career and character.

First, he got a job at Macy's department store making \$6.75 an hour.

Second, he started to draw and paint and sold his work on the boardwalks of Venice Beach.

His first day on Venice Beach, he made \$6. The next day he made \$30, then \$40 and finally from \$100 to \$200 over a weekend.

"It doesn't sound like a lot, but at the time, you have to realize I wasn't making that in a week at Macy's," he said.

At the department store, he was barely making above minimum wage in a city where the cost of living was three times that of his hometown of Gillette.

After a big weekend on the beach, he asked his manager at Macy's to switch him to part-time. The manager said no, so Leonard told his manager to put him on-call.

"To this day, I'm still on-call," he said.

The rest of the summer, Leonard hustled around the boardwalk, becoming one of the staples for thousands of tourists and locals passing by daily.

He maneuvered his way around police tickets, fights, pesky hobos and the regular scam artists.

Leonard, who was shy growing up, inbedded himself in the culture and learned how to sell himself.

“Getting out on the boardwalk taught me how to talk about my work,” he said. “It taught me how to sell myself. It came from the heart. Any good salesman needs to know his product. It forced me to open up and articulate what my art was and what it meant.”

Leonard thrived on Venice Beach. He cleaned up pretty well and was able to live off the sales he made, all while doing what he loved.

“No one forced me to do it, I just went and did it,” he said. “I didn’t even see it as a choice. I had to do it if I was going to make it a lifestyle.”

Come September, the tourists leave the beach and the boardwalk goes dry. When the tourists left, so did his income.

Panic didn’t set in, but he worried a little. Winter was coming. How would he make it through?

Working the boardwalk introduced him to a few friends in the movie business. He ended up doing some poster and illustrative work for a group of filmmakers who went on to make the cult classic horror flick “The Blair Witch Project.”

With a few good connections and a few other off-kilter gigs, he survived winter and made it to another spring and summer. Not only was he back at Venice Beach, but he started expanding his art to farmers markets, flea markets and any other kind of market that would let him set up shop and sell.

After years of Southern California boardwalks, he took his show on the road. He bought more expensive tools, bigger posters, experimented with expensive printers and materials. He traveled to Florida, Colorado, Texas and Arizona to sell his work.

In 2005, he decided to go east. The New York Expo art gallery was, and still is, one of the largest in the country. When taking into account the \$5,000 cost for a booth, travel, shipping and living expenses, Leonard invested \$12,000 into the adventure.

“That’s all the money I had,” he said. “I maxed out all my credit cards, borrowed money from friends, and then I made \$12,000.”

Leonard eventually broke even at the expo.

“I didn’t even have enough money to send my work back home to me,” he said.

He was dead broke, had a ton of inventory that he could store and was feeling as helpless as ever.

He learned something important. Distribution would be key to his success, and he couldn't be in two places at once so would need a distributor, some connections across the country and a sales manager.

He also knew he was due for a creative renaissance.

"I knew why I failed," he said. "I was all over the place with my styles and techniques. My stuff was selling on the boardwalk because the general public doesn't really care if you have three different styles. But when you're dealing with galleries and publishers, they want to know how to package what you're doing and what to expect from you."

Homeward inspiration

From 2006 to 2007, Venice started to crack down on street artists. Laws changed and local cops became more aggressive.

Gabe got out of there.

Around this time, he was doing a lot of fantasy painting, making him one in a sea of people doing that type of work.

For inspiration and a fresh start, he turned his gaze toward Gillette and home.

For years, he'd forgotten what it felt like to be in the west, to be out in below-zero temperatures as the winds bit into his face. He'd forgotten the smell of the prairies and the sound of tires slushing in the snow.

He forgot what it was like to be home.

He started learning about the old American west, reading about outlaws and watching movies about lawmen. Then he made a connection he didn't think he'd ever make.

"Those people still live here," he said.

Apart from wardrobe and technology, the people who lived in the 1800s weren't so different as they are now.

He noticed how people interact with each other. There's a very specific way people from Wyoming talk to each other, he said. It's in their body language, the way their facial expressions change and react. It's in the way they act, talk and reference people.

“You are who you are,” he said. “When I started to paint these figures, I found out that other people like it. They like to see what’s beneath the surface.”

He wasn’t hanging around outlaws when he was growing up, but moving on to a larger city helped him compare the cultures of his small hometown to other people around the country.

It was around 2008 — and after he left the Venice Beach scene when cops started enforcing harsher boardwalk laws and the people became a little more seedy than usual — that he started to make real career strides.

When he started to get his work out there, new style intact, he was pinned the “cinematic” painter. His work is villainous and heroic. It has a smoky darkness contrasted with a sunset-colored hope. He’s intrigued by the motion of the in-between moments: the flicking of cigar ash at a poker game, the unholstering of pistols, the subtle flip of a woman’s hair.

Soon enough, Leonard’s art was being bought and sold in major cities all over the country and in art galleries in Europe. To date, he has made original pieces for people such as film directors Quentin Tarantino and Ruben Fleischer and actor Charlie Sheen.

Through his ups and downs and in the middle of his wave of success, Leonard is quick not to heap praise upon himself or his work.

“No failure is permanent, and no success is, either,” he said.

He also doesn’t want to reflect on a career that he feels is just beginning. It’s taken him 25 years to finally get the hang of it.

“If I take the credit, then I have to take the blame,” he said. “But I am proud that I’m representing the people who I grew up with, my friends and family. I’m very fortunate to be where I am.”

To fellow artists

When Leonard stepped into his old high school art room for the first time in 23 years, his foot was in a boot. He had a bone spur and an Achilles accident just before visiting Gillette.

He was in town for a two-night art exhibit at Wyoming Art and Frame earlier this month. The hometown kid was being celebrated and his art was featured.

Before the festivities began, he hopped up on a table in the classroom on a Friday afternoon where it all began.

Close to 30 students, a few art teachers and his first mentor, Mr. Amend, gathered around to hear Leonard's life story.

"I believe I stand as a reflection of the community and the surroundings I grew up in," he said. "It's all because of the investment Gillette puts into the arts community. Without that access at such an early age, I don't think I'd be where I am today. I had so much encouragement. Talent can only take you so far."

A young girl in the class said she wants to be an illustrator when she graduates college. She's started to look for art schools in the area. Leonard gave her and the rest of the class the advice he's lived by his entire life.

"Make lots of art, put it out in front of people, and if you really want to do it, don't have a back-up plan."