



Contributed photo

Watercolorist Bill Fravel is moving to the Sedona, Ariz., due to disappointment with the arts scene in Santa Cruz.

Say goodbye to watercolorist Bill Fravel

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Of the scores of watercolorists that hang on Davenport artist Bill Fravel's walls, one in particular stands out. It shows a dirt road winding through green hills lined with grape vines and barnhouse wineries. The painting is called "Lost the Wife at the Sixth Tasting."

It won him the prestigious Ruth Rossman Award in the National Watercolor Society's 2005 Juried Membership Exhibition. And it started out as a portrait of

Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Let's hope Fravel shows that same sense of adaptation when he packs up shop, leaves the area he was born and raised in and moves to Sedona, Ariz.

He and his wife Marilyn will hit the road as soon as their Davenport house sells. One last exhibition for Fravel is to be held 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday at the Art League Gallery, the same building where the artist won his first award in fifth grade.

"You never want to get too complacent, in art and

in life," said Fravel, surrounded by all sizes and shapes of paintbrushes at his Whalehedge Gallery. "When you're old, you never want to look back and ask 'Why didn't I do that?'"

Fravel gained a degree in architecture from the University of Notre Dame, but dropped a promising career in 1975 to pursue his artistic desires, namely watercolor.

He said he's always had an artistic eye, one that allows him to see things dif-

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ferently from most people. Sometimes it's been a curse, he said.

He had trouble reading at an early age. Instead of reading the letters for what they were, Fravel was more interested in the shapes they made, and in the negative shapes created by the space between letters. He would get to the end of a page without any clue of what he had just read.

Santa Cruz County and all its encompassing beauty can provide a lifetime's worth of inspiration and subject matter for an artist. It's more difficult to claim that Santa Cruz can also provide a lifetime's worth of paying work for an artist, and this simple matter of economics is behind the Fravel's move to the Southwest.

"Sedona has a population of 11,000," explained Fravel. "There are 80 art galleries in town, and they get 4 million tourists a year.

It's that international draw that I'm looking for right now."

Fravel said he was also attracted to the level of the artists he found exhibiting in Sedona.

"It seemed to be all up at one high level, which is also part of the appeal of Sedona," said Fravel. "There are all different levels of art here in Santa Cruz, and that's great for the community. Art doesn't necessarily have to be something that you need to sell, but at this point in my life, I need to start selling it. Sedona is where I need to go with what I'm doing right now."

While it's true that Fravel has received numerous awards and accolades for stunning watercolor depictions of California from the Sierra to Big Sur, Santa Cruz loses something more than just an artist when Fravel leaves.

For the past three years, he's been the director of the Art League's annual Countywide High School Exhibition (Fravel is donating 20 percent of the proceeds of Saturday's exhibition to

the event). For years, he's given free demonstrations at county high school art classes and at his Whalehedge Gallery and home. He's coached 26 youth soccer teams in Davenport, as well as being involved in the Big Brothers mentoring program. In short, he's been a valuable member of the community, giving back whenever he finds time.

"Bill has handled a lot of the exhibits at the Art League," said former director Dick Bennett. "It's a complicated task, and he's always managed to pull it together with his sense of humor. It's always good to have him around; it makes things more fun."

Listening to Fravel tell his stories, it's clear that humor has guided his philosophy toward his life and his art.

"Humor ties into everything. You have to have a good time," he said. "I tell people in art classes that no one takes up art to make life tougher."

His free-spirited attitude and his love for kids of all ages often

lead to some unlikely collaborations. He tells of a little girl, no more than 2 years old, who was watching him paint one day in Big Sur.

Everytime Fravel used the color yellow, she squealed in delight. Fravel reached down, picked up the girl, placed a brush in her hand and watched while she proceeded to make yellow marks across the bottom of the canvas. Fravel painted around the yellow and made the marks into flowers.

It's often said that you can tell a person's character by asking their peers.

"Bill introduced himself at the beach where I was working on a watercolor," said Bonny Doon artist Boris Tyomkin, who invited Fravel to participate in a show he curated last month. "He's a humble guy who lets his artwork speak for him. He's good technically, and he's got soul. It's a good combination," concluded Tyomkin.

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