

# Local cartoonist shares tips with fourth grade artists

By Paul J. Seeling  
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NEW RICHMOND – Local cartoonist Sketch Gustafson met with about ninety fourth grade artists last Friday at the new Hillside Elementary School in New Richmond.

The special art class presentation was arranged a week ago as the result of a special project the cartoonist was commissioned for with Hillside.

Sketch has been working with Spring Valley resident and Hillside fourth grade teacher Liz Erickson on a cartoon graphic for the school's T-shirts. The New Richmond School District mascot is a tiger and the new elementary school was looking for a new tiger with a younger appeal for the younger students that could be put on t-shirts for students and staff to purchase. As a result of that project Hillside art teacher Mike Pike wondered if Sketch would come and discuss cartooning as part of the art classes' flip-book project.

Three classes of fourth grade students filed into the lunch room and Mr. Pike asked his artists to have all eyes and ears on their guest, cartoonist Sketch Gustafson.

"Hello, my name is Sketch, growing up I didn't have computers or video games. I was a fat kid, a really fat kid. I didn't have any friends, I got beat up. My mom passed away when I was 14, it made me who I am. I decided I'm not going to take it anymore.

I started drawing my own friends, when I wanted a fort to play in, I drew it with all my friends," said the cartoonist and he continued, "I was the youngest of eight children with seven older sisters and 12 years between me and closest sister."

Sketch shared his academic history, graduating almost the last in his high school class, but he received insightful words from his brother-in-law who suggested that he needed someone to emulate. At this point he casually removed his signature leather jacket and as he turned his back to the students to place his jacket on a counter, the back of his sweatshirt gave the students a hint of who he had chosen, as all could see the huge Disney

logo on his back.

"When my brother-in-law stopped laughing at me, he said OK, good choice, go for it. I did, I sent a letter to Disney studios and they wrote back saying finish school and give us a call. Now I had a dream, a vision," he told his

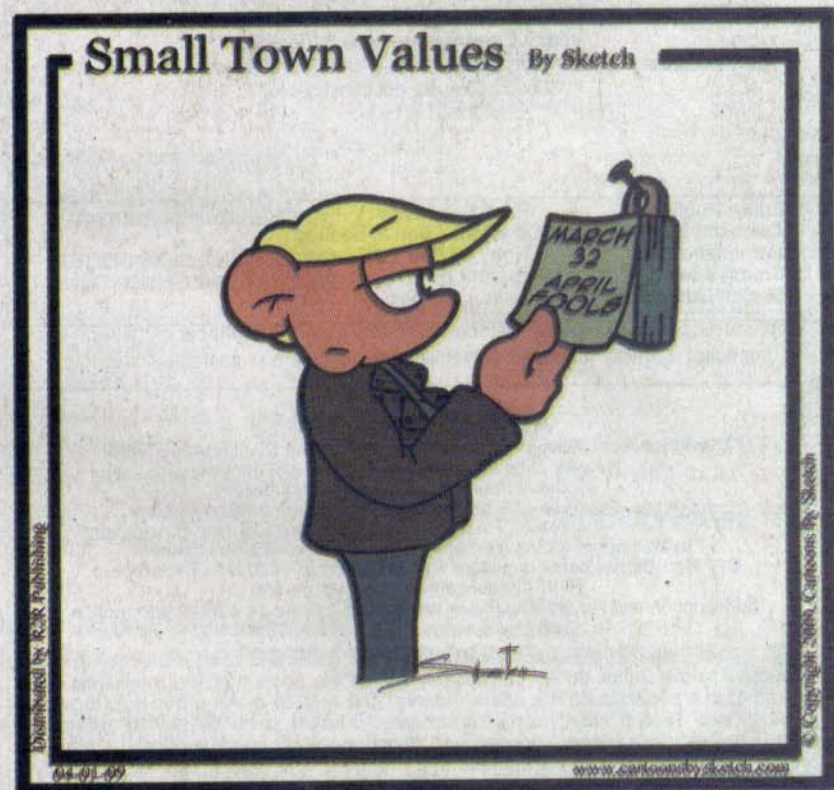
eager listeners.

He went to college and graduated at the top of his class and gave a speech to his graduating class of 4,000 students. Then he applied and was accepted to the Ringling

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Sketch at the white board making a cartooning demo at Hillside Elementary School last Friday. Photo by Paul J. Seeling





Spring Valley cartoonist Sketch Gustafson shares his talent with 90 4th graders. Photo by Paul J. Seeling

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Brothers School of Art in Orlando, Florida. He packed up his belongings and his girlfriend they moved to Florida with the help of her parents.

On the first day of class he was called to the office and informed he was short a mere \$10,000 on his tuition and would have to leave class.

His girlfriend's father said, "Alright let's put things back on the trailer, we'll move you back to Minnesota."

Sketch refused to let go of his dream and told the girl's dad, "No, we are staying and I will get a job."

With determination he applied for a job at Walt Disney World where he was hired. Not as a cartoonist, but as a food service employee serving sandwiches in Frontierland. That was OK, Sketch knew that the 'Mouse' hired from within and soon the six-foot-four inch tall young man was then working as 'Goofy' for the Character Department in full costume walking the grounds at the greatest theme park in the world. Through contacts there he got the opportunity to show his portfolio to the animation department at the MGM studios.

Long story short, Sketch got to work on the animated movies 'Mulan' and others.

Then his girlfriend's grandma got sick. Sketch made the decision to leave Disney and return to the Midwest with the girlfriend who wanted to come home to care for her ailing grandmother.

He relayed the rest of his history to the students who were listening to his every word.

Now he is married to the woman he loves. He has been diagnosed with crippling scoliosis that will ultimately confine him to a wheelchair. "But that's Ok. I was afraid they were going to tell me I wouldn't be able to draw," he said with a smile.

"Now I am inspired by Charles Schultz, does anyone know who he is?" asked the cartoonist.

Not a single hand went up - "Peanuts? Charlie Brown? Now the hands shot up.

Included in the advice to the young artists the cartoon artist advised them they would need three key people to help them be successful. First, you need an 'Inspiring Person', for me that is my wife Shannon who is always helping me guide my work with her loving concern.

Second, you need a 'Number One Fan', that is my mother-in-law, who is always looking for my work to be published and if it isn't she is on the phone wondering why not.

Third, you need a 'Publicist', and that is my editor/publisher, who has faith in what I produce. If you have

those three in your corner to support you, you will be successful. It doesn't mean you will work at Disney, but it means you will be successful with your art at whatever level you pursue.

Then it was time to draw.

The students had been given a blank sheet of paper.

"Now what you see is not a piece of paper, it is a window into another world. That is the window into your imagination," Sketch assured the young artists.

With that he told the students about 'Rule Number One,' which is that you can't screw up. There is always the first artist killer question that someone will ask, "What is that?" He explained, "They don't get it, that's OK. It's your special drawing. Play by your rules!" and he continued, "There are no rules, this is your creation!" said the artist confidently to his admiring audience.

Then he explained that at Disney they taught him to rip a corner of the blank sheet so the blank perfect square would now be less than perfect and would not intimidate the artist.

With that he instructed the young charges to go ahead and rip a chunk off the perfect sheet. They then proceeded to do three drawing exercises, which Sketch did at the same time as the students on the big dry erase board that had been set up in the front of the lunch room.

First they drew themselves, then there hand, which was according to Mr. Pike a great exercise for the students.

"I hear a lot of fourth graders say, 'I can't do that,' and this will help give them the confidence that they can," noted their art instructor.

"Last, but not least, signature. Always sign your work, it gives you ownership of your creation," advised Sketch.

He then had a fast paced question and answer session that included more quick demonstrations on the drawing board of how to draw things like a T-shirt and his Shar-Pei dogs.

All too soon the hour was over, but not before 90 eager and appreciative artists lined up to get an autograph for someone the obviously admired.

For Sketch it was a first, and he was more that happy to sign every one.

Liz Erickson had this to say about Sketch's presentation "The kids loved it, the teachers thought he should be a motivational speaker.

Erickson was asked what her students thought and she said, "When I asked them about it at least 5 of them said they went home and started to draw," she continued, "Another child stated they would never be afraid to draw again.

She also said, "A student who draws at home stated to his teacher that he was going to carry his drawing pad with him from now on."

The presentation also carried over from Friday to class the following week Erickson said, "On Monday we had discussion on the important people in our lives and on making good choices."

Erickson had the concluding praise for the local artist, "Sketch did a great job captivating the students in both his stories and his drawings."