

# PAINTING HIS DREAM

*Dallas native rediscovers his passion for art via his own studio and gallery*

• Story and Photos by Jolene Guzman / The Itemizer-ObsERVER •

**D**ALLAS — He didn't know it at the time, but Dallas artist Tom Kunke had an early clue at what he would be doing in his second career.

When he was in elementary school in Dallas — kindergarten or first grade — an *Itemizer-ObsERVER* photographer took a picture of him painting during class while two friends looked on.

Kunke, 51, recalls that it was around President's Day, so the painting was of George Washington cutting down a cherry tree.

He still has a copy of the photo. Throughout his first career as a college professor at Warner Pacific College in Portland, he would run across it.

"Would get a big smile on my face because I thought, 'Well, maybe someday in the future I will get to paint again,'" he said. "I worked as a professor for like 25 years, but in the back of my mind it was always in there to think about painting again."

Kunke did pick up a paint brush during college — but as a house painter to help get through school. He also took an art class for elementary teachers. His professor, artist James Kirk, who is now retired and living in Monmouth, used to tease him, calling his painting style "primitive."

"He would never have guessed I would end up doing this," Kunke said. "I would have never guessed that for myself."

Years later, Kunke became what he calls a "closet painter." He actually would paint and then put his creations in his closet, unwilling to show them publicly.

Then Kunke met his future wife, Conni. Coincidentally, their first date was at an art gallery. Soon they

were married. She discovered his painting ability and encouraged him to take his work "out of the closet."

"None of this would have happened without her inspiration," Kunke said. "I would have still been putting my paintings in a closet. She made me put them up on a wall."

Kunke's first art show at the Bush Barn Art Center in Salem in July 2010 was a success and eventually led to the couple wanting to open Tom Kunke Art Studio and Gallery on Main Street in Dallas a little more than a year ago.

"I've actually had people come in and say 'We think you are a little bit crazy,'" Kunke said. "We've heard we are crazy or dumb to start a gallery in Dallas. You know, I don't really think it is too crazy to do something that you love to do and that you are passionate about. We prefer to think of ourselves as brave."

Kunke said he's still pinching himself because he can't believe the turn his life has taken. In five years he has begun a career as an artist, returned to his hometown — he's the son of long-time Dallas High School basketball coach and superintendent Gordon Kunke — and finally, opened an art studio.

"I never would have guessed we would have been doing this five years ago," he said.

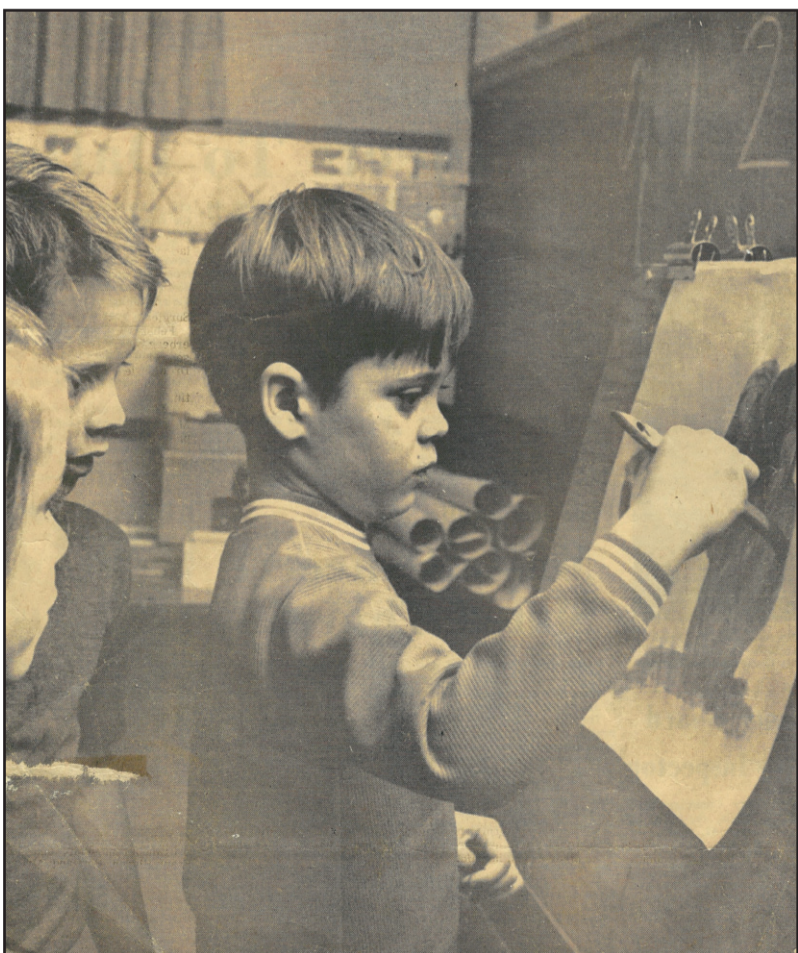
It was about that time he got serious about painting, developing a unique abstract style that doesn't require the use of a brush. Instead, he uses a palette knife to pile paint onto a canvas in multiple layers, mixes colors and scrape it off to reveal layers underneath.

Sometimes the paintings depict



## Painting a Dream

**What:** Tom Kunke Art Studio and Gallery.  
**Where:** 357 Main St., Dallas.  
**Hours:** Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, 1 to 5 p.m.; Saturdays by appointment.  
**For more information:** 971-409-7686; online at [www.tomkunkeart.com](http://www.tomkunkeart.com); email to [tom@tomkunkeart.com](mailto:tom@tomkunkeart.com).



ITEMIZER-OBSERVER ARCHIVES  
**A premonition? Perhaps. A young Tom Kunke paints in his Dallas elementary school class in this long-ago taken *Itemizer-ObsERVER* photo.**



**With the support of his wife, Conni (left), Tom Kunke has embarked on a second career as an artist. His abstract paintings have been well-received and late last year, the couple opened a gallery and art studio.**



**Kunke's art is abstract and he creates his piece in an unusual way, using a palette knife instead of a brush to pile on and scrape off paint.**

discernable objects — he has a number of paintings of Dallas-area landmarks in his studio — others are less representational. Often,



Photo courtesy of Tom Kunke  
**Kunke has begun painting Dallas landmarks, such as the grain elevator on the south side of town.**



Photo courtesy of Tom Kunke  
**Kunke painted the Muir & McDonald Tannery before it was torn down.**



**Kunke said this quote by Van Gogh sums up his creative process. More recently, he has taken on sculpting, carving birds like the one pictured.**

said Conni, who often serves as his alarm clock when he's lost track of time painting. "He's so excited and so passionate about this."

Now people are starting to take notice of his work and the gallery.

Kunke has invited other local artists to show their work in the studio and has established partnerships with Amalie Robert Winery of Dallas to do wine tasting during shows, as well as Partnerships in Community Living's furniture shop in Dallas to make display pedestals. The couple has also hosted school field trips to the studio and Tom has visited high school art classes.

Kunke has even dabbled in wood sculpting, making birds carved out of walnut.

Outside of his wife's support, Kunke said the best encouragement came from Kirk, who visited the gallery before its December show.

"When he left, he said 'I'm proud of you,'" Kunke said. "That made me feel really good."

The gallery will host another show starting Memorial Day weekend entitled "Iconic Willamette Valley." Kunke hopes to establish more relationships with area artists and businesses, keeping his childhood interest and now second-chance occupation growing.

"I think the things that we sometimes dream about or aspire to do as kids, we don't always get a chance to do," Kunke said, "but I've been really blessed to have a second career to do something I'm really passionate about."