

Consilience: Do You Know This Man?

By Erika Paleck

His name is Walter Neuman, and he's your neighbor. His story is nothing special you might think. His dad was a butcher in Hood River. He got into a bit of trouble after the family moved to Southeast Portland; he grew his hair long and was ever so politely asked by a judge to join the Marine Corps so he could show his new drill sergeant his "Peace" and "Love" tattoos. Survived the Marines and Viet Nam only to be almost killed by a drunk driver thirty-five minutes after his medical benefits expired. 2,800 stitches is just the beginning of that story. Worked different jobs including painting a mural of the Acropolis at the Copper Penny. He tagged along with a friend who was working on a sign in Vernonia; that's what first brought him here. Broke his back again while taking care of his invalid mother, making himself an invalid, too. Returned to Vernonia looking for affordable rent. Now you see him in line at Sentry or paying his bill at West Oregon Electric. He's an ordinary man you might think, a little gimpy. Nothing special there. But you'd be wrong.



Walter Neuman

Try figuring it out for yourself sometime, what makes us do the things we do. Mostly we do things because we want to or have to in order to survive. Then there are the things we do because we must, because there is something inside of us that will not be denied.

With Walter, it's art. As a child in rural Hood River, he had no television so he entertained himself by drawing. As soon as he was old enough to hold charcoal from the fireplace, he was drawing on butcher paper. He got really motivated when an older brother, Joe, painted a stallion rearing for a local newspaper and it got published. "I can do that," he thought. So he did. And he started selling his work, too. Right away. It was that good.



Art took a backseat as he grew up and went into the service. After he got out, while between jobs in '88 or '89, he saw William Alexander, the original "Happy Painter" doing his "Magic of Oil Painting" on OPB. He thought, "I can do that." So he did. Are you detecting a pattern here? The owner of "I Been Framed", a framing and artist supply store in Portland helped him by discounting art supplies and encouraging him to develop his craft. He again started to sell his work around Portland and did magazine covers for American Veteran (Am

Vets) magazine, including a picture of the Arizona War Memorial for the 1991 cover commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

1994 wasn't a good year for Walter. He broke his back again while lifting his mother out of her wheelchair. It was the beginning of a long period of self-medication until the doctors were finally able to get a handle on pain management for him. He went from a life of physical labor to one of disability, from doing for himself to just hanging in here. In 2001 he left Portland and landed in Vernonia to take advantage of the affordable rents that disability payments allow. When it didn't seem like it could get much worse, he contracted a mystery virus in 2005 and ended up in a coma for three weeks.



That's always been an enigma--where do we go while our bodies are in a coma? Some think we actually leave our bodies and visit old friends. Maybe we go play hide and seek out among the planets. Maybe we just have a dreamless sleep. Wherever Walter went, they apparently smacked him around a bit and said, "Hey! Wake up! You're wasting your time! Don't make us tell you this again!" And they sent help, too.

Because when he woke up, he really woke up. His girlfriend, Susan Johnson, basically quit her job and spent every day in the ICU with him, then came back out to Vernonia to take care of his animals. She spent at least three months nursing him after he got out of the hospital. This was no easy task; his memory was so messed up, he had trouble remembering his name when he got home. Among other things, she made him watch Jeopardy in order to exercise his mind. With her help and encouragement (and an occasional push and shove), he decided to pull himself together, so he started painting again--a little bit here and a little bit there. "I can do that."

In 2007, he contacted the then-director of the Learning Center, Jesse Jones, and told her that he would like to teach classes in drawing and painting. In October of that year, the first ads and press releases went out for the Gallery Project at the Learning Center in conjunction with First Friday. There was a juried show at the end of November, and several of his pieces made the final cut for the exhibition planned for December through June of 2008. While that show never took place because of the flood in December of 2007, it was the nexus for the First Friday Floating Galleries that took place from May through October of 2008. He was in every show, selling something at all of them. He built all of the display easels, too, with money supplied through Hands-On Art. He plans to be at every show in 2009.

This is from a self-taught artist who figured it all out by himself. He started doing landscapes and got really good at that, because he wanted to do scenes with Native Americans and wild-life. So then he taught himself how to draw and paint animals and people. Seascapes, too, because you never know when someone will want a picture of the ocean in their living room. He works from photographs and does commission work on almost any subject. He doesn't have a favorite style; he just wants to do it all well. He seems to have a gift for showing people who think they can't draw anything that they can with a little patience.

What does he get from his art besides an occasional check? "A sense of being." Makes you wonder who you might be standing next to in the grocery store, doesn't it?

If you are interested in lessons in drawing or basic acrylics, or you have a commission or portrait that you are thinking about having done, give Walter a call at (503) 429-5211. And if you know any other Walters out there, drop me a line at: epaleck@gmail.com or call me at (503) 429-0898.

Consilience: The joining together of knowledge and information across disciplines to create a unified framework of understanding.

Miss Teen Rodeo Oregon Coronation



Stephanie Esterly, 2009 Miss Teen Rodeo Oregon, of Scappoose is crowned 2009 Miss Teen Rodeo of Oregon. She is being crowned by 2008 Miss Teen Rodeo Oregon Ashley Ekstrom of Rainier. Coronation ceremonies were held on Saturday, January 24 at the Fairgrounds Pavilion in St. Helens. Stephanie says that she is very grateful to everyone that came out and supported her.

Vernonia High School and Middle School students were treated in February to a presentation by Brad Henning entitled "Don't Take Love Lying Down" which is designed to teach kids about healthy relationships.

Brad describes the differences between how men and women each feel and communicate about life, love, and relationships. This talk helps kids better understand themselves and shows what real love is and is not. Kids learn why they feel so hurt, disappointed, and betrayed by what they are currently experiencing and what can be done to change it.

Here's what some Vernonia students had to say about Brad Hennings program:

"Hilarious! True! Caught our attention!" K.E.

"Funny... Kept audience involved... interesting!"

"Brad Henning did an excellent job of presenting information while keeping attention and not making it so serious that it got boring." M.M.

"Gives new perspective about our lives." D.V.

"Very factual." K.H.

"Sex is good, but it's better if you wait!" S.D.

"We learned stuff but me made it in a funny way, so we paid attention and it wasn't boring." J.D.

"Too short!" D.V.

"It's the most focused I've ever seen the student body during an assembly." P.W.

"We should have him here every year." B.M.

This assembly is just one way the Vernonia School District is working to better educate and prepare our students for life.

Sponsored by the Vernonia Prevention Coalition