

# Brush Hour

The late artist Jeff Davies left a legacy of works and lasting friendships

By Walt Shepperd

**T**he constant and curmudgeonly presence of artist Jeff Davies will be missed at the breakfast tables on Westcott Street. The seemingly unstoppable driving force of creative energy that he personified was felled by a fatal heart attack on Feb. 12. Reflecting on that presence last week in his office at Eureka Crafts, 210 Walton St., Bill McDowell, a colleague of Davies for 30 years, expressed surprise at his passing at age 67.

"We knew his health had been deteriorating for probably three years," McDowell said. "He had this recurrent gout problem, I guess since he was in the service. That got him into the V.A. Hospital a couple of times. Then they discovered that he had diabetes, but he hated the V.A. Hospital so much he just resisted going there for care. Then they found out he had a heart problem. He was on medication, but again, he didn't like to go to the V.A. for checkups."

Ironically, from McDowell's perspective, Davies actually had been looking pretty good for the last six to eight months. "He lost a lot of weight," McDowell said, "and he quit drinking, pretty much. He seemed to be on the mend. Then he had a heart attack. He wasn't expecting to die, but he had two concerns: that his remaining work, about 200 pieces, be consolidated, and that when it happened we just throw one hell of a big party."

The party is tentatively scheduled for June 24, according to Don Deschamps, who lived across the street from the late artist and admits to being profoundly influenced by Davies both personally and professionally. Deschamps mentioned McDowell and his wife Deb Haylor McDowell as well as Syracuse M&T Jazz Fest impresario Frank Malfitano as helping to organize a memorial event for Davies, hopefully connecting in some way to this summer's Jazz Fest.

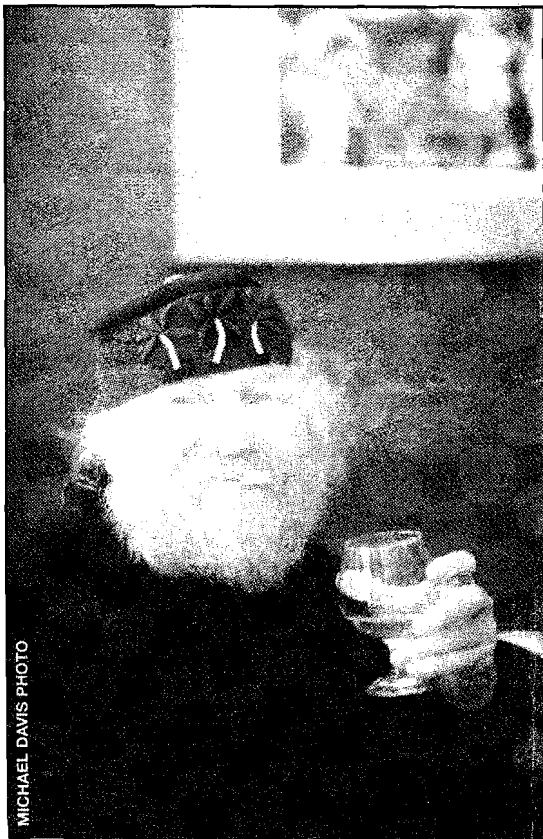
"We expect a lot of people," McDowell projected of the party. "We'll have people flying in from overseas, from all over the country. It's going to be out at his friend's farm at Red Creek, about 15 miles south of Syracuse. She has a large property where people can camp out."

McDowell noted that his wife, an artist and full-time art instructor at Onondaga Community College, is exploring the possibility of gallery space at OCC to display Davies' work with a sale, perhaps to establish a scholarship fund for Davies' grandchild. "Frank offered to have the party at OCC," Haylor McDowell said. "I said, 'Frank, there's only one problem with that. I think there's going to be an awful lot of vodka there and the state won't let that happen on campus.'" Reflecting that the party could be a throwback to the Be-Ins of the 1960s which helped foster Davies' visual

style, McDowell hopes the fireworks display he provides for Jazz Fest can be part of the memorial.

"I offered to put his ashes in a shot," McDowell noted. "It would only go up 50 to 60 feet, but it would be a rush for him. It would match his personality. He was an ornery kind of guy, but you never knew how serious it was, because he just liked to get into confrontations and argue. Ninety percent of the time you couldn't tell whether he was leading you on just to get into an argument or make a point."

With Davies' art the sole source of income to support his minimalist lifestyle for the past 15 years, along with a small ownership share in a family ceramics business in Ohio, McDowell saw Davies as an organizer in the art community helping promote the work of others in galleries and



MICHAEL DAVIS PHOTO

Artist Jeff Davies, circa 2000: An ornery kind of guy who just liked to get into confrontations and argue.

shows. "He enjoyed being a controversial figure. In a way he felt that his mission in life was to stir things up. He got expected reactions to the more outrageous work that he did. And it was intentional."

Everson Museum of Art director Sandra Trop recalled that Davies' work appeared in several of the institution's biennial exhibits, but he never received the recognition of a one-person show. "His work has a kind of caricature style, extremely colorful," she observed. "Big murals, big paintings, they made a big impression, like Jeff did. His consciousness developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s and it stayed that way. The people who were drawn to him were people who had fun with him during that period, and they remained devoted to him. He affected a lot of younger people in the Westcott Nation who didn't live through the 1960s. He fascinated them."

Trop does not believe, however, that Davies' work will increase markedly in value after his death as happens with many non-mainstream artists. "To buy it for investment would be a mistake," she said. "You should buy him for fun." □