

One-man show puts dying artist on center stage



Maureen C. Gilmer, maureen.gilmer@indystar.com 7 p.m. EDT August 26, 2015

Don Finch will show off his life's work in a one-night exhibit at the Hoosier Salon in Carmel



(Photo: Maureen Gilmer/The Star)

Don Finch doesn't know how many days he has left, but he's at peace with the cancer that is consuming his 62-year-old body.

He's tired but not in pain, he says, and his sense of humor is intact. Example: He wore a "Walking Dead" T-shirt to a recent family reunion.

Finch was gearing up for retirement last winter when a fall down the stairs at his Indianapolis home left him bloodied and confused. After a few stitches, he figured all was well. That is, until a nurse urged his wife, Sandra, to take him in for more tests.

"There's something wrong," she said.

That "something" turned out to be two large tumors on his liver. In May, doctors gave him a couple of months to live. Chemo was out. Radiation was out — it would have destroyed his liver, effectively killing him.

After learning he had no treatment options, he took it like the Marine Corps veteran he is.

He went home. Went to bed. Couldn't sleep.

"I have a lot of trouble sleeping. I'm taking like 20 pills a day. So, I went out in the backyard and built a fire in the fire pit."

He didn't yell or swear or cry, he says. He thought about what was important to him — his family, his art. He decided he had no choice but to accept the cancer. That didn't mean giving up; it meant carrying on. Staying busy.

"I don't mean to sound cold or callous, but I've made peace with it. I've already lived past the prognosis. It's spread all over my liver like a little network. I've seen pictures of it. I got a tumor here (he points to his rib cage) about as big as a baseball and one here (next to the first) that's as big as a tennis ball."

What he doesn't have is pain. "The doctors are surprised I haven't had any pain."

Art therapy



Don Finch paints in his basement studio at his Southwestside home. (Photo: Photo by Jobina Wooldrige)

So, Finch stays busy doing the thing that gives him peace. He paints and draws. He makes art. Mostly animals — cougars, lions, apes — as well as nudes, landscapes and seascapes. He's drawn to big cats because he used to have one.

"We got a baby cougar for my daughter for her high school graduation," he said. "That's what she wanted; she wanted to be a vet."

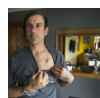
His three kids are grown now, and the cougar eventually was moved to an animal sanctuary.

These days, Finch, who retired after a long career as a billboard artist/installer, is spending more time in his basement studio. He's been preparing for the thrill of a lifetime — a one-night, one-man art show Friday at the [Hoosier Salon \(http://hoosiersalon.org/\)](http://hoosiersalon.org/) in Carmel.

Signworks owner Andy Chapman arranged for the show as a gift of sorts for his friend and colleague of 20 years.

"I wanted to give Don something he'd never had before — his own gallery show," Chapman said.

Finch is not just a billboard artist.



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"I've done a little bit of everything; that's how I sold my services. I could do gold leaf, I could paint your sign, I could repair a sign."

He attended Herron School of Art and learned the art of hand-lettering before computers took over. He reproduced album covers for large displays at Karma Records for years. He's done murals and more.

"I remember doing 18-foot-tall portraits of Bob Gregory and Don Hein (longtime local TV news personalities). Their eyeballs were THIS big (he throws his arms out). I learned a long time ago, when you do a painting, whether it's a person or animal, you gotta do the eyes right. If the eyes look like the picture is staring at you from anywhere in the room, then you got it right."

Finch will have about 40 pieces in the show. Most will be for sale, but that's not his primary objective.

"It's the creating that's important. That's satisfaction to me — to do a nice piece and have people see it."

Slowing down

"You know how you plan in life and then life takes over? I got away from drawing and painting for a while; I was so busy I didn't have time."

Retirement gave him the time, but his illness is stealing it away.

He's lost 50 pounds in the past few months.

"My body's weaker because I've lost muscle mass. Sometimes I'm a little wobbly on my legs, but otherwise, I'm functioning fine."

Hospice care checks in on him at home twice a week.

"Supposedly with what I have, I'll just go into a coma and slip away."

Is he scared?

"No, I joke about it; that's sort of how you have to do it. There are some things I wish I could have done. I could spend a week at the Louvre. I'd like to see the Coliseum, the Pantheon, the Arc de Triomphe. I wanted to take my son deep-sea fishing."

He's asked friends and family not to be sad, but rather to remember all of the fun they've had together. "That's what I want said at the burial," he said.

But right now, he's looking forward to Friday's show.

"I'm not nervous, it'll be fun. I've been in a show once a long time ago, but this is *my* show. I really appreciate all the hard work of people who want to help me."

One thing he says he won't be doing is dressing up.

"I got dress clothes, but I ain't gonna wear 'em. I'll be wearing jeans and a Marine Corps T-shirt.

He has another T-shirt at home, one that says "I ain't dead yet." And he has one more joke, "I thought about crossing out the 'yet' and writing over it 'oops.' "

"You have to have a sense of humor and just get up and do what you want to do."

Call Star reporter Maureen Gilmer at (317) 444-6879. Follow her on Twitter: @MaureenCGilmer.

One-man art show

What: A celebration of art and life.

Who: Don Finch.

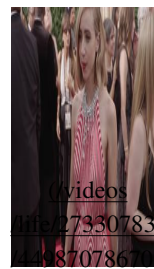
When: 5 to 9 p.m. Friday.

Where: Hoosier Salon, 22 N. Rangeline Road, Carmel.

Info: (317) 669-6050.

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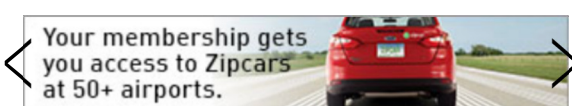
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