

An

# Muralist Dave McShane

# Profile

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Dave's paint-stained jeans and shoes are characteristic of his style.



In the main room on the first floor of the Mary and Frances Wis-ter Studio—that's where the art classes take place at La Salle University—a baker's dozen of students are mulling over sketchpads clasped unevenly to ragged easels. Every student is attempting to sketch charcoal representations of the same naked model, a fair woman with jet-black hair cropped short around her head. Wearing a paint-smeared T-shirt and similarly decorated jeans, Dave McShane, 41, walks among the students, observing silently at first. Soon he is critiquing and offering help as he goes, suggesting that one student take a line in a bit to make one arm thinner and that another extend his stroke further down the page to keep with propor-

tion. It is proportion that causes Dave to stop behind a particular student who has sketched legs too long, a torso too compact or maybe even both. Explaining the key concepts, he outstretches his right arm, measuring the model's head with his index finger and thumb. He then works down with that measurement, signifying that the torso is roughly two heads long and one-and-a-half heads wide, while the legs are jointly three-and-a-half by two. Although this class has proven to be a popular one over the last decade, most La Salle students outside the Honors Program have probably never heard of Dave McShane. After all, he's just a graduate of the class of '88, a man who lives a while away in Belmont Hills, with his wife of six years, Eurhi, and his two young daughters, Pearl and Violet (one and three-years-old, respectively). Although he is an art professor at La Salle, it's still not surprising that many students here don't know his name—the man has functioned as a glorified adjunct for the past decade, teaching just one class, this class—Honors Art: The Creative Process. Still, despite the anonymity of his name, students at La Salle, as well as throughout the city, have most likely encountered McShane through his work. A scene: The corner of Third and South streets above Jon's Bar and Grille. A target on the wall, alternately yellow and black, with a black and white image in the foreground—Philadelphia's native son, Larry Fine. The curly-haired stooge wears a plaid suit and a polka dot tie, while playing the violin vigorously. Another: Broad Street near Summerset Avenue. A wall, washed in sky blue paint, with a black and white picture in the middle. The picture blurred slightly, intentionally. The famed Dodger, Jackie Robinson, sliding into home plate, as a catcher waits for the throw to put on the tag. Jackie's hat flying off and his arm extending out of the black and white box and into sky-blue territory. These murals are just two of the 40 that McShane has contributed to the city through its Mural Arts Program. Many Philadelphians are familiar with one, if not both, as well as many of his other works. McShane is proud of this. He's proud that he gets to enshrine great people on the walls of Philadelphia. He's proud that some of his better-received murals, like his Jackie Robinson one, have inspired neighbors to organize block cleanups and take more pride in their areas. Even though the city's art elite looks down on murals as a lower art form, he's proud that he is able "to paint about things that everyday people can look at when they're out around the city and relate to somehow." Despite these contributions and his apparent contentment, McShane might never have become an artist. Twenty years ago he was preparing for med school and on his way to a career in surgery when he came to the realization that he was on the wrong path—that art was his true passion.

Dave is busy at work at his latest mural at William Cullen Bryant Elementary School in Philadelphia, April 2008.



### Mixed Signals

Although he's not part of the current college-going generation, McShane was also plagued by a variety of options as a kid, and encountered the same problems that many students currently face when he attended La Salle in the mid-'80s.

Currently running late for an interview in the Student Union, McShane has yet to eat because his night class ran long. The class, his second new course in his 10 years at La Salle, focuses on mural arts, and its goal is to have the students paint a mural in the Olney area. It's Monday, March 19 and so far a destination has been picked (at the corner of 20th and Conlyn, a few blocks behind North Dorms) and a design decided upon (a portrait of Mr. Philmore Johnson, a man who has contributed mightily to the neighborhood but became infamous to many older La Salle students as the 20th Street protestor with the bullhorn). With all this work done, the actual painting process is just around the corner.

Having just arrived in the Union Food Court, McShane is chowing down on a meat-lover's pizza. Wearing a black and white flannel coat over a red shirt of the same fabric, McShane resembles a rugged outdoorsman, despite his oval, brown-rimmed glasses and a slight frame. His long brown hair (restrained into a pony tail and tucked under a black Eagles hat) and a big heavy beard—"for when the mural painting begins; it's going to be cold"—only add to the effect. McShane is here because he's agreed to talk about

his experiences in the hopes of showing students that they should always follow their passions, and not feel trapped by anything, major or otherwise.

Born to a middle class Irish family in 1965, McShane was tied for the youngest among eight children with his twin brother Frank. As McShane tells it, he and his brother were always considered the class artists. In grade school the duo used to get out of class to complete art projects—"cards for the bishop and things like that"—and then in high school they took it to a new level, creating the scenery for plays and painting murals around their school, Paul VI High School in Haden Township, N.J.

"It was a great time, and my brother got to take art class for all four years of high school, but I had to make a choice," McShane says, his eyes reflecting in the dim light of the food court, alternately appearing blue and green. "I was in the advanced track science program and there weren't enough electives to do both so I had to make a choice, because the school wouldn't allow me to take an extra class."

After some deliberation, McShane chose science, believing he would one day become a surgeon. He said he lamented having made the decision, but looking out intently over the red Coca-Cola cup in his hand, McShane declares that he still thinks he made the right decision for himself at the time. He loved art, but as a high school student, surgery seemed like a dream job.

"I liked the idea of it, of being somebody that would get into the body, fix what's wrong with it and sew it

up," he says. "To me, that seemed like an amazing thing to be able to do. Since I was doing well in science class and I had pretty good hand-eye coordination, I thought 'I'm good at this. This is what I'm supposed to do.'"

Reflecting back on his childhood experience, McShane recalls an uncertainty that is to be expected in young people. McShane says that although his brother always knew that he wanted to be an artist, that he was unsure of his own fate.

"I don't know if he ever really understood why I'd want to be a doctor, because we both loved art and he knew all along that he always wanted to be an artist," he says. "I was always unsure. Even when I was younger, I wanted to be a football player or whatever the new thing was that month."

Thus, while Frank (who has since achieved success as a freelance

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illustrator) pursued education at the University of the Arts, McShane eventually wound up at La Salle in 1984, majoring in biology as an honors student on a full-tuition scholarship.

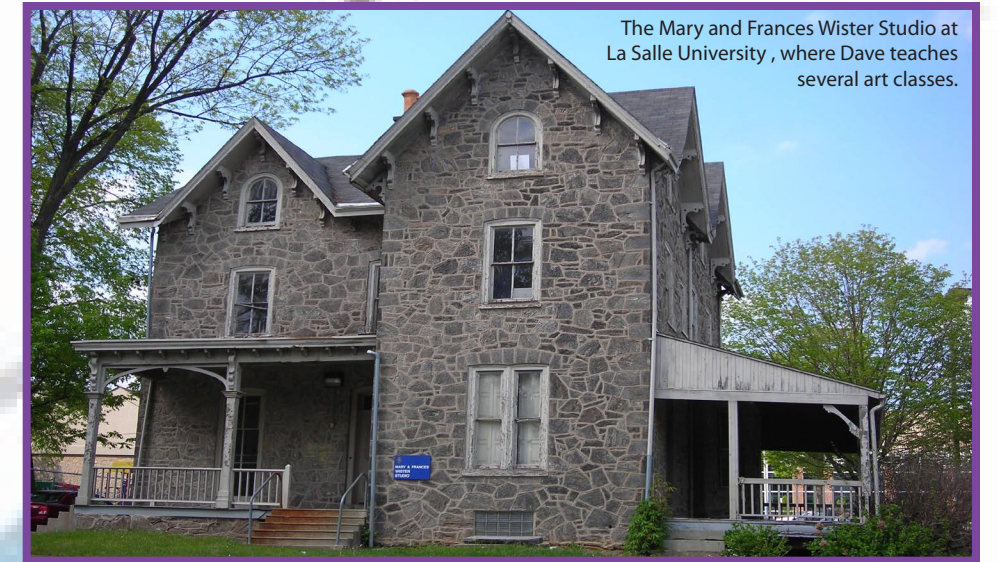
McShane did well in college biology, so much so that he wound up being ranked first in his class.

However, as time went on, he began to feel a tug away from the sciences. It started small—at first he'd spend all his free time painting murals around the school and working on the scen-

ery for Masque productions. There were also times when he'd

visit his brother at art school and think, "Man, I could do this stuff." Eventually, he would find himself taking breaks from studying organic

The Mary and Frances Wister Studio at La Salle University, where Dave teaches several art classes.



chemistry in the library by walking over to the stacks that housed the art books and reading them, thinking in the back of his mind "I'd much rather be over here right now, than over there with that chemistry book."

As time progressed, the pull became stronger. Although he had nearly completed the lengthy application process for med school, he found his interests drifting away from science in his junior year, so much so that he allowed himself to embark on a camping trip the weekend before he was scheduled to take the MCATs. It was on that trip that he had his epiphany—that he realized he was destined for a career in art, not medicine.

Although McShane declines to get into specifics, he says he had a near-death experience on that trip that made him think hard about his life, his choices in it and the direction in

which he was headed. "It was clear to me at that time, when I started

evaluating a life-and-death kind of thing, that I was on the wrong path," he says. "The whole experience crystallized my feelings for me, and it really affected the rest of the decisions I made."

Momentarily, McShane consid-

When beginning his murals, Dave first paints out a grid and then outlines the design.



**"It was clear to me at that time, when I started evaluating a life and death kind of thing, that I was on the wrong path."**

ered dropping out of school, but he realized that would be foolish, and instead decided to spend his senior year taking as many creative classes as possible. He took the sciences he needed to graduate, but then he also made sure to take classes like oil painting and film as art. He even did an independent honors project for which he painted images for several of his favorite Robert Frost poems.

**"It's a humbling thing, but there's also this resentment that grows in you..."**

Although he admits to allowing himself this treat, McShane makes sure to point out that, despite a crystallized feeling, the decision to abandon his path to med school was a tough one. He never sent in his applications, and money played a part in that, but he had to get pass a nagging fear of wiping his slate clean and starting over.

"It was tough remembering all those all nighters, the time in the lab and all the hard work I put into being a successful science major. The hard part came with leaving all that behind," he says. "I had very good reason to believe I would've gotten into med school, considering [my transcripts]. I didn't do that well on my MCATs because at that point I was losing my interest in the discipline, but even still I knew I could do it, and so there was this big open door there."

Trailing off for a moment, McShane takes a breather to collect his thoughts. The intensity with which he tells his story invokes in him the aura of a much younger man, but the sprinkling of sporadic gray in his beard, strong on the right side of his chin and weakly sparsed on the left, brings one back to reality.

"I think," he says slowly, thoughtfully. "I think part of my struggle also had to do with my working class background. It's a humbling thing, but there's also this resentment that grows in

you, like, 'I'm going to school with rich kids, who for their birthday get a new Camaro, and I'm riding a crappy bike to school and working every day for minimum wage as a janitor in a grade school.' And so with that mentality, being a doctor just seemed like a big deal, a way to break out of that."

Interestingly, McShane points out, he wound up taking a job at the complete opposite end of the spectrum in terms of prestige and money. He believes there are very few professions as working class as fine arts, especially considering his work is predominantly with murals.

"I mostly go into poor communities to paint murals, and it's interesting [for me] to see myself embracing roots that I was trying to get away from coming out of high school."

#### Putting the Pieces Together

As the interview comes to an end, McShane begins to summarize his thoughts, in an attempt to give his story some kind of succinct finale. He notes that during the conversation, and in his life in general, he has trouble being concise, as he likes to meander and babble on.

Despite this penchant to meander, when talking to McShane it becomes clear that once he made the decision to change his path in life, he became focused and worked hard to make his dream come true. After taking a year off to work in an insurance company and make some money to pay off some loans, McShane started all over again in a certificate program at the Academy of Art, which he looks back on as the perfect place for him, a place with formal training that focuses on the human form.

"A lot of people see medicine and the arts as two opposites, but for me the connection was my fascination with the human body," he says. "Early on I thought I should be a surgeon, but I became less interested in cellular functions and all those miniscule things about the internal body, and much more interested with it as an aesthetic form. As a result, the Academy was a perfect place for me to be."

In addition, McShane believes his undergraduate work as a biology major came in handy at times. For instance, when he took anatomy for artists, he had a leg up on his classmates, as he already knew the human anatomy.

"Knowing the anatomy, and the way muscles work and flex, was a big plus, but it was also more than that," he says. "I felt like I got to do art school with some experience



under my belt, so I feel I maximized on the education more so than if I had done it coming out of high school."

After completing the certificate program in 1992, McShane went on to receive his Master's in Fine Arts at the Academy as well, taking advantage of a job running the school gallery that allotted him free tuition. Shortly after graduation he fell into mural arts, and then returned to La Salle, this time as a teacher, teaching the dream class he always wished he could take while he attended the school as a student.

Looking back, he's happy he put the extra work in to achieve his dream, and encourages students in a similar position to do the same.

"There's so many people that get stuck in a rut of life and just feel like they're stuck in what they're doing. You only get one shot at it and the later you wait, the harder it is," he says. "You're so flexible when you're young. Even though it may seem like you're not, because you're invested in a major or have debt, you can still go for it. Why regret spending a lot of time in something, when there are so many other things out there? If you're passionate about something, there's no reason you shouldn't do it."

"I remember this person I once knew who said, 'I would do anything for that job. I'd kill for that job.' She was really into animals and wanted to work at the zoo and feed the animals. And I was like 'Why not go for it?' And she said, 'Because it required a lot of training.' And that blew me away, because she had just said she'd kill for the job, and she wasn't willing to try to go for it and do the work. I always thought that was a shame, because at 21, 22, 23, you're too young for regret, too young to give up on your dreams."

#### Everything in Proportion

It's April 20, and it's hot outside, the kind of hot that

makes people, young and old, want to go for a dip in a pool, any pool. McShane is working on his latest mural, the one he's been planning with his mural arts class for the entirety of the spring semester. Although he comments that the group is behind schedule, the mural itself is well on its way to being completed, with scaffolding scheduled to come down on April 30. Front and center, the image of Mr. Johnson is already finished. Wearing a gray suit and a pink tie, his face displays an array of confidence. There are butterflies on both sides of his head—two to the left, one to the right, each of a different shade—and a random assortment of spot color below him—reds, blues, blacks. The grid has been completed for quite a while, and

one can get a sense of the ultimate vision—Mr. Johnson from the chest up, surrounded by flowers and butterflies, all of which are being painted on by four neighborhood children, two boys and two girls, all of a different age—by looking at the marks sketched in light blue. These marks provide a sort of paint-by-numbers outline for the students helping McShane,

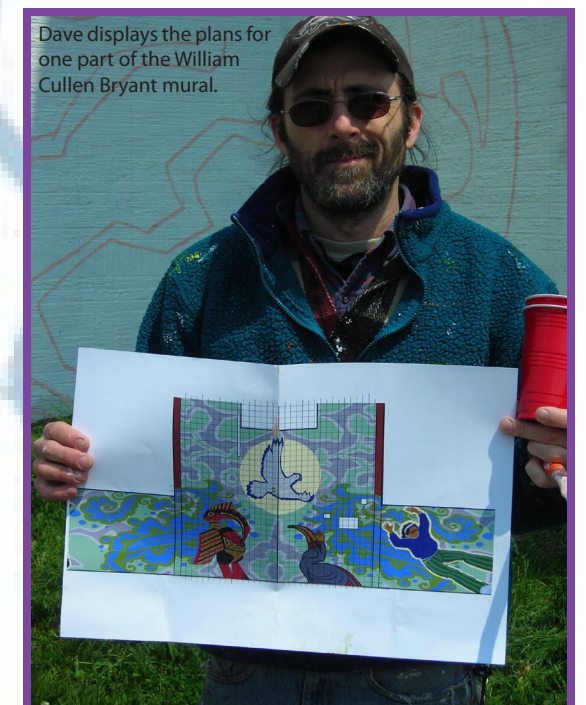
for at the moment, all of whom are working with a different

color on a different level of the scaffolding.

There are two scaffoldings running the length of the mural, and McShane is currently on the third level of the left scaffold, putting some finishing touches on an orange butterfly. He wears a black T-shirt over a teal long-sleeved one, a blue Cubs hat and his characteristic paint-covered jeans.

Likely a sign of the weather, but perhaps symbolic of the fact that his latest vision is coming to life, McShane appears reborn, looking five to 10 years

**"If you're passionate about something there's no reason you shouldn't do it."**



This mural of Philadelphia resident Philmore Johnson was created by Dave and a group of La Salle students in 2007. It is the mural featured in the story.



younger due to being clean-shaven. When asked, he says there is no deep meaning behind his new look, saying simply that he knew it would be hot out, and so he shaved it the night before. However, he coyly suggests that it also happens to be a nice birthday present for his wife, whose birthday just passed on Wednesday.

After completing his task, McShane descends to the second level of the scaffolding, where he offers a bit of advice to a female student painting various blotches of background blue among the flower outlines. When he reaches the ground, he takes a quick drink of water, and quickly makes his way over to his gray Saturn Ion, which is filled with all sorts of painting equipment—buckets, rolls of paper towels, paint brushes, levels and a variety of tools are crammed into the back seat—to retrieve a brush. He moves behind the car, quickly pours some yellow paint out of one of several buckets, and then goes about setting up a newly arrived male student, who has shown up to offer some aid. McShane positions the man on the lowest level of the right scaffold, where he helps him to begin painting a big dandelion right beneath Mr. Johnson’s image. After a moment of mentoring, McShane leaves the man on his own and comes out in front of the scaffolding to observe what is happening.

An elderly African American man pulls up in a tan Buick LeSabre, and yells out to no one in particular, “I sure am glad you guys picked our block.” Having heard the man, Dave turns. “What’s that?” he says, unsure if the man is happy or aggravated. “You’re happy we picked it?” “Yes I am,” the man returns. “It looks beautiful.” With that, Dave offers his appreciation, waving his paint-spotted hand as the man goes on his way.

Meanwhile, a group of several young children gathers across the street, pointing at the mural-in-progress and whispering excitedly amongst themselves. Within a minute or so, another man, this time a middle-aged African American with no hair on top, but a slew of curly black around the sides, shouts out his appreciation—“It’s looking great everybody. I love it.”—as he walks down the block, right past the gawking children.

“[The response] has been great,” McShane says. “A lot of people who came to the meeting have been dropping by to offer support, and others from the community that didn’t even know about the project, have also been very appreciative.”

Turning his attention back toward the mural, Dave looks on for a moment, and then, taking it all in, he sighs, as if to communicate without words, “This is where I’m meant to be.” His life in proportion, Dave reflects for another moment, and then gets back to work. ●

Frank Visco is a graduate of La Salle University, class of 2008. He wrote this story in his third year at La Salle.

