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Lillian H. Heil

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Earl Bradley Lewis: The “Class Clown” Who was Determined to be “Somebody”

By Lillian H. Heil
Professor Emeritus
Brigham Young University

In the sixth grade, E.B. Lewis decided he would show everyone who had laughed at him for wanting to be a lawyer that he could make a contribution to society by becoming an artist. Lewis gives much of the credit for his success to an uncle who believed that the function of freedom is to free someone else. His uncle helped free him by taking him to the Saturday morning Temple University School Art League. Lewis felt himself driven to be the best. By college he had a 3.94 grade point average. He majored in graphic design and illustration and studied art education at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art. He also found the medium of his choice—watercolor. After four years at Temple, he taught art and freelanced in graphic design. During 1985 and 1986 he exhibited in a Philadelphia gallery. The success of his shows brought him public recognition and acclaim. His shows in the Rosenfeld Gallery continue to sell out. As an artist he has become “somebody.”

Lewis has done many paintings of the river, fishermen, bridges, and fog. He loves fog because it eliminates details and is mysterious. For a long time, Lewis didn’t paint faces, but he has now added people to his repertoire. One of his magazine covers attracted the attention of children’s books producers. In 1994 his agent asked him to look at children’s books to see if illustrating them would interest him. Lewis did, then immediately phoned his agent to tell him he was interested. His perceptive agent replied that he had already sent Lewis’s portfolio to publishers because he knew Lewis would be intrigued with illustrating children’s books. Lewis received six contracts for books. He says no to books when he doesn’t love the story or find imagery in it. He knows what it feels like to hate a job and doesn’t want to spend time on a book for which he has no strong, positive feelings. The stories he chooses are about appreciating individual’s differences, overcoming deceit with cleverness, accepting tragedy and change, respecting freedom, and, most of all, being somebody who makes a positive difference in the world.

Lewis starts his illustrations with a thumbnail sketch and then enlarges it. He does a lot of research, especially about the setting of the book. He takes photographs of models and of the terrain for the story. To help him illustrate one book, he went to Ethiopia; for a book about Ramadan he went to Cairo. He’s been to villages with no restaurants where he had to kill his own chicken for a meal. He has found models on the streets of Philadelphia.

Lewis wants to make a difference. Nelson Mandela is one whose thoughts he admires. He remembers Mandela saying that our deepest fear is not that we aren’t powerful; it is that we are too powerful. Lewis became a teacher because he wanted to help children. He gets chills when a light bulb goes on for a child—when a child understands. He feels that if teachers lose that excitement, they should either leave teaching or rejuvenate themselves.

When asked about the difference between fine art and illustrating, Lewis said that to him, fine art demanded that the artist set up a philosophical setting for the painting, whereas in illustration, that setting is created from the words. The illustrations work—but never compete—with those words to convey the emotion of the story.

Finally, when asked how to encourage visual talent, he replied that art materials should be shared with children. The emotion in painting can’t be taught, but it can be encouraged. He wants to arm children for the future so they too can become “somebody” who will change the world.