

# The Servant Artist

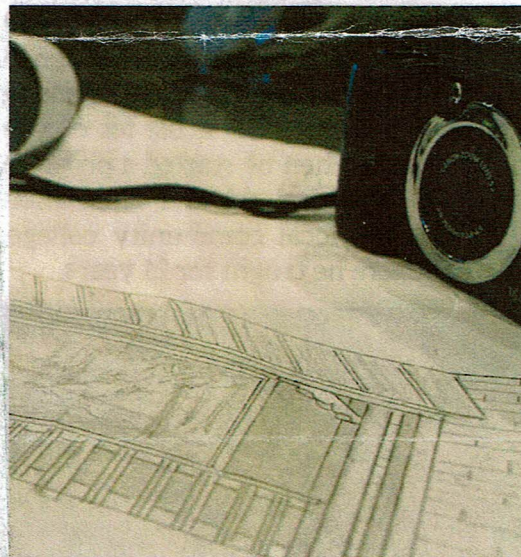
By Bill Oakleaf & Robyn Sanders

**O**dds are that if Bill Oakleaf is talking to you, he will be sharing the gospel with you within ten minutes. The 82-year-old volunteer artist and craftsman enjoys sharing how he came to saving faith in Jesus Christ 64 years ago.

Bill says, "I discovered that Christianity is not a religion, but a personal relationship with the living Christ! The apostle Paul used the term 'to be in Christ' over 130 times in his letters to the churches in the New Testament. He wrote to the Corinthian Church that 'if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone and the new as come.' I can only testify to the fact that on July 14th 1950, at the age of 18, I received Jesus as my personal savior and made him the Lord of my life. The old life had gone and the new life had taken its place. I experienced new life in Christ. I

was 'born again' just as Jesus said in the third chapter of the gospel of John. As followers of Jesus, we are not saved to sit - we are saved to serve! What a joy to get out of the pew and onto the playing field for our Lord, partnering with the living God to make an eternal difference in this world."

Bill was still young when he realized he had been given an ability in art. It was a gift that was to define his life. He has used that gift to earn a living and to bring glory to God. When Bill graduated from High School in 1951, the Korean War was on, so he enlisted in the Navy. He became an aviation photographer stationed at the Naval Air Station at Quonset Point in Rhode Island with Squadron VS31. When on base, he did aerial photography and lab work. When the squadron went to sea, Bill served on 4 different aircraft carriers. He photographed flight operations from the 07 level - the highest point on the carrier.



Bill taught technical drawing for 21 years, and he now uses that skill as a volunteer to bless ministries like Tejas.

After two and a half years in the navy, Bill married his hometown sweetheart, Margaret. At the same time, he was transferred to the naval photo center in Washington DC, where he worked in the art and animation department producing art for armed forces and Pentagon training films.



When Bill and Margaret set up their first home in DC, they realized they were more than a thousand miles from anyone they knew. The thought was, "how then, shall we live?" What would be the values they would live by in their home? Two of the things they decided to do that day were to read God's word together every day, and spend time together in prayer every day as long as their Lord kept them together. They kept that commitment to God for 20,440 days, until Margaret was called home to be with her Lord. Bill says, "When you spend time in the word and in prayer together, two things happen: you get to know your Lord a lot better and you get to know each other a lot better."

Following his service in the Navy, Bill and Margaret moved back to Minnesota where Bill designed and built homes while working as a commercial artist for eleven years. Then he started a program in technical art and illustration at the local community college, where he taught for 21 years.

"The greatest joy in those years was to be salt and light, and to love on my students for Jesus, and see them come into a personal relationship with their Lord," Bill says.

During his last year of teaching, Bill shared for the first time with his students how he had prayed for each person in every class over the years, and that he was now praying for each one of them. Then he looked at each student and told them how he had prayed for them that morning. Bill says that when he got to the last one, he didn't think there was a dry eye in the room, including his own. For some, it may have been the first time they ever heard anyone bring their name before God in prayer.

"That classroom became a sanctuary of the living God for a moment in time," Bill says, "and everyone felt His presence and love."

In their retirement, Bill and Margaret traveled for 15 years with SOWERS (Servants On Wheels

Ever Ready), taking their RV over 25,000 miles across the US, helping to prepare childrens' homes, camps, churches, etc. for Christian ministry.

The 20-foot-long mural in the Tejas Dining hall is a hand-painted gift from Bill. He started painting the mural, entitled "The Wildflowers of Texas," on two 10-foot-long panels of masonite, and it took him about 600 hours to complete it. He calls it a labor of love.

"When you serve the Lord, there's not a lot of money in it," Bill says, "but His retirement plan is out of this world!"

He also designed, built, and painted the Lights of Tejas Nativity scene, the sign in front of the Tejas Inn, the two "Camp Tejas" signs outside of camp and off of Highway 77, and architectural renderings for future Tejas buildings.

Bill loves to serve the Lord with the works of his hands, creating pieces of art that people can enjoy together.

"You're creating something that goes beyond yourself," he says, "something that is a blessing to others."

There is a button Bill regularly wears, pinned to the front of his shirt that reads, "Too blessed to be stressed!" and he says it serves as a reminder and encouragement to other believers.

Bill says, "I strongly encourage any retired person or anyone else to get involved in serving our Lord with your time and talents. In so doing, you will be blessed, and be a blessing, as you serve our wonderful Lord!"



(Above) Bill designed and helped construct the awning that now covers his mural, *The Wildflowers of Texas*, in the Tejas dining hall.