



DEAN WILLIAMS, PAINTER

On this hot summer morning, Dean Williams is working on a painting at his studio, a cavernous one-room space on Broadway, sandwiched between a blighted inner city neighborhood and the luminous luxury of the World Trade Center. Williams and some of the artists who live in adjoining studios joke that it's the only neighborhood in town where chardonnay is sold on one side of the street, crack on the other.

Williams is a 38-year-old bodybuilder who wears colorful threads in his dreadlocks and has a fondness for heavy bracelets. He's working on a what he calls a black cowboy series of paintings, and recently received a modest grant from a Houston-based foundation to teach art and lecture about the West. The pay is minimal, he says, but it's a start.

Two years ago he quit a well-paying graphic design job he had held for several years in Seattle. "The climate was dismal," he says. "And the people there start to

emulate the climate. They insulate their personalities."

Referring to the corporate work environment he fled, Williams says the way people treated one another was so completely demeaning and lacking in humanity it made him cry. "I finally left when I realized I'd rather starve."

He visited Long Beach two years ago and decided to stay. He likes the climate and the people. For now, he lives a little closer to the financial edge than he'd like. It would be nice to get his teeth fixed. But the smile is warm and sure when he says, "All I have is me. It would be a criminal act not to give back what God gave to me."

"The worst thing for people is to get caught up being a victim," he adds. "It's worse than death. Death is part of living. To be asleep in a spiritual sense, to live without expression and magic, that is worse than death."

"I am an artist. I've always been an artist. For me, it's resurrection time."

The Artists in their Souls

Throughout this town are those seemingly ordinary people who go to great lengths to satisfy their strong needs to sing and paint and carve

STORIES BY JANET WISCOMBE
PHOTOS BY SUZETTE VAN BYLEVELT



On the outside they seem like ordinary people who wear ordinary clothes and go to ordinary jobs.

John Sanders owns a dog kennel.

Janice Speers waits tables.

Dean Williams paints houses.

Francisco "Chico" Ramirez preps cars.

Michael Sheppard crunches numbers.

Pam Chapin analyzes legislation.

Robert Daley counsels the mentally ill.

On the inside, however, they march to the beat of a different drummer. They are artists, members of a fiercely passionate underground tribe of people who go to great lengths to sing and paint and carve. Whether sculpturing a chunk of pine in an isolated warehouse district near downtown Long Beach, or composing a song at a piano in an ocean-side condo, they are as compelled to create as the sun is to rise.

"If I didn't sing, it would be like cutting off a part of my body," says Pam Chapin, an administrator in the California State University chancellor's office by day, an opera singer and member of the Los Angeles Master Chorale by night.

John Sanders, dog kennel owner by day, artist by night, is reminded of a comment Jackson Pollack once made about creating art, "When I am painting I have a general idea of who I am."

"That's the way I feel," Sanders offers. "If I work on a piece of art every day, life is better."

And from Dean Williams, whose day jobs range from graphic design to house painting, "Painting is my salvation."

During recent interviews with several of the dozens of artists in the community whose skills and talents are hidden from view, a theme begins to emerge. They say their day jobs pay the bills, but it is making art that sustains and liberates their souls. They say they feel an obligation to use their God-given gifts. Most of all, they say they make art because they have to.

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JOHN SANDERS, SCULPTOR

PAM CHAPIN, SINGER

Most of John Sanders customers haven't any idea he's an artist. They know him as The Dog Guy, the pleasant man with the blind left eye who responsibly and affectionately cares for their poodles and dachshunds.

Sanders, who is 49, has been in the dog business for nearly seven years. It pays the bills and allows him some flexibility to work in his studio, a distant world of ideas and forms located just beyond the cages of golden retrievers and chocolate Labs.

He has no burning passion for pets. He likes dogs, sure. But running a kennel is not about PLAYING with dogs, he emphasizes. "It's about cleaning up after dogs."

Sanders is a respected conceptual artist within the Long Beach art community. He has taught art for years at various colleges in Southern California including the University of California/Irvine. But



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Unlike many artists who work for rent and food but are

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without a permanent teaching appointment, he's had to rely on other work to pay the bills.

He's the first to say that he's struggled mightily to maintain a studio where he can function as an artist. He also says the constant scramble to earn money and to eke out the time to make art didn't help hold either one of his marriages together.

"Sometimes you have to ask: 'What's the payoff?'" Sanders wonders aloud. "I know when I'm making stuff, it feels good. It keeps me out of trou-

ble. It's something I can do until I die."

Questions about his own mortality have been particularly pronounced since a diagnosis of Hodgkins disease two years ago. He has completed radiation treatment and is feeling well. "I never really thought of dying," he says. "But I do realize more than ever how valuable life is."

"I know that when I leave the Earth, I won't have been as fulfilled as a dog kennel owner as I am as an artist. I also know that if I had to choose between making art and being around people, I'd be around people. I like people a lot."