

# The passion of life up high

## Shane Bennett leaves his artistic legacy on walls and buildings around the country

By Jason Vondersmith

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### COURTESY OF THE BENNETT FAMILY

A mural painter who died tragically in a March 18 snowmobile accident, Shane Bennett was one of Portland's most prolific painters, and touched many people with his infectious personality.

Often while standing on a swing stage and painting 200 feet up on the side of building, Shane Bennett and his best friend would talk, and one of the subjects recently had been death and memorial.

"And, it was not a somber conversation," Sunny Ellerton says.

"We spoke of what the other one would do, if one of us passes away. In order to have a really good party, you gotta wait three weeks after, so everybody could be there. We would do something cool."

The good die young, Bennett believed. And, indeed, the good died young March 18 outside Aspen, Colo., when Bennett lost control of his snowmobile and crashed into a tree. He was 31 and left a legacy in his short life that his family and friends will attempt to keep alive.

An April 10 memorial with reggae artist Don Carlos – Bennett loved reggae – drew 700 people to the Roseland Theater, and friends and family spread his ashes on land above his favorite surfing spot at Cannon Beach.

"It was one last hurrah," Ellerton says.

A 1997 Wilson High grad, Bennett had touched many people with his infectious personality, and as one of Portland's most prolific painters. Bennett grew up in the air, starting mural painting with his father at age 12. Involvement in his father's business, Art FX Painting and Murals, increased to where he basically ran the company. It's regarded as one of the best mural companies in the country, commercial painting the old fashioned way with patient hands and passion and not riding the wave of simply rolling down cheaper vinyl advertisements.



*TRIBUNE PHOTO: L.E. BASKOW • Shane Bennett's most cherished painting was the wildlife mural on the south- and west-facing side of the mausoleum overlooking the Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge — believed to be the largest hand-painted mural in the country.*

Bennett had been working on an MTV Networks reality series called “The Walldogs” (it’s what he called his crew) at the time of his death, and estimated that he had worked on more than 150 walls in his career ... the last being an ad for the “Clash of the Titans” movie.

While most of the jobs were in Los Angeles, New York and Las Vegas, Bennett’s most cherished painting took place in his hometown. Continuing the project that his father, Mark, and Mike Houck had started years ago, Bennett repainted the heron and added to the mural with other wildlife images on the entire south- and west-facing side of the Wilhelm Portland Memorial Mausoleum.

It overlooks the Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge and it’s believed to be the largest (43,000 square feet) hand-painted mural in the country. In the near future, an image of Bennett will be put there as well, commemorating the man who brought the huge painting to life.

“It’s already becoming somewhat of a landmark,” says Dan Cohen, an Art FX painter and another of Bennett’s friends.

Cohen worked side by side with Bennett for 12 years.

“I would not hesitate to say that (Art FX artists) are the best mural painters in the country,” he says. “Unfortunately, Shane was a big part of that. We did the first mural in New York after he died, and, true to form, we did it really quickly and well. That was a good thing.

“Mark was there, and it was good for him to see that even though it was so tragic that Shane passed, the business is still strong. The beat goes on with a very heavy heart.”

Friends and family know they have a void in their life, still coming to grips with not having such a pivotal person around.

“His smile ... always smiling,” says Ann Khawaja, Bennett’s longtime friend. “We’ve always been really close. You feel a big missing. He was kind of the glue, he brought so many people together. It’s a big shock, considering it was somebody so young and successful.”

### **Minus the dreadlocks**

Bennett had many interests. He marched in the Rose Festival parade, playing cymbals, and played for the Wilson High baseball team. He graduated from Portland State University. He avidly rode snowboard, snowmobile and surfboard and liked many things daredevilish – as if hanging 200 feet in the air and painting walls wasn’t enough! “Big ups!” he would say, in excitement, or “booosh!”

He had a boat, and many times drove people around in his fixed-up 1969 Lincoln Continental. He arduously kept a journal since 2003, and wrote thoughtful letters to relatives. He loved his grandfather. And, oh, was he into reggae, minus the dreadlocks.

“He thought he was Jamaican in a previous life,” Sheryle Bennett says.

It was “music with a spiritual message,” another friend, Brian O’Dea, says. “It brings people together. It’s positive.”

Bennett would paint images, many of them being of famous reggae artists such as Bob Marley, Ziggy Marley, Buju Banton, Winston Rodney and Peter Tosh; Sheryle Bennett wants to set up a fund for underprivileged kids who aspire to be artists, selling some of her son’s work for the charity.

An avid concert-goer, Bennett had made a 13-song CD of reggae songs about mothers, and gave it to Sheryle Bennett. One time while standing in line for tickets to a reggae concert, Bennett made a deal with a woman – whoever got the tickets, on a lottery basis, would take the other one. Bennett took the woman to the concert.

“He never met a stranger,” his mother says.

His father was semi-retired and lives part of the year in Costa Rica. His mother works as an Art FX bookkeeper. The beat does go on with Art FX. Pattern maker Brian Buchanan still does the scaling, projecting and perforating of lines and figures.



*COURTESY OF THE BENNETT FAMILY • Bennett began mural painting with his father's company, Art FX Painting and Murals, at age 12, shown here with his sister Marlana.*

### **'A happy man'**

Ellerton and Cohen still roll out paper, mark perforations with graphite and paint images, often in the 100-by-200-foot, 34-story-high range while harnessed and standing on a swing stage.

Someone will always be missed. Ellerton was in Vail, sick, or else he would have been around Bennett the day his best friend died.

"There'll be a void in my life forever," says Ellerton, who, besides missing Bennett as his friend, found working on Johnny Walker and "Sex in the City 2" ads pretty surreal after his friend's death. "Sometimes I'm able to block it out of my head, other times it hits me like a ton of bricks. Hard to grasp."

Bennett wrote the younger of his two sisters, Marlana, a motivation letter once, stating, "don't ever be foolish enough to believe the best is yet to come ... don't expect tomorrow to be any better than today, because at any given time, tomorrow may never come."

Mark Bennett, in a remembrance statement, wrote that "if I could I would sure trade places in this timing of death. But fate is the hunter."

Sheryle Bennett stood over her son's body after his passing, "and I could see a smile on his face," she says. "I could see his dimples."

She recalled what he had told her: "If I died on a mountain or in the surf, I'd be a happy man."

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