

This metal sign will hang outside the Barton County Arts Center, 1401 Main, after making an appearance in the upcoming Ellinwood After Harvest Festival parade. Ellinwood artist Robert L. Joy created the painting.

Arts Center new sign is 'colorful, different'

By SUSAN THACKER

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A future piece of downtown art is sure to make people look twice, says Karen Neuforth, director of the Barton County Arts Council. And she's not talking about the Jack Kilby memorial statue.

Ellinwood artist Robert L. Joy has painted a sign for the Barton County Arts Center. Once it's bolted to the awning of the Arts Center at 1401 Main St., it should be within view of the future Kilby memorial on the west side of the courthouse. It will be hard to miss the metal sign, 10 feet long and 4 feet tall, which Neuforth describes as "colorful, bright... and different."

That's not a bad description of Joy, whose past exhibits at the Great Bend Public Library have sparked conversations about the definition of the word "art." One exhibit consisted mostly of singleton gloves the artist had found, mounted in various poses and named.

"I don't have any 'regular stuff,'" Joy said.

His wife, Marcella Birzer, said his work defies description. "It's Bobberdilly art," she said. (Joy's blog and Web site can be found on the Internet at bobberdilly.com.)

"Basically, I've always been an artist," said Joy, 66. He has a master's degree in art from Fort Hays State University. Joy taught art at Roosevelt Junior High School in Great Bend, and later worked as an artist at Golden Belt Printing for 23 years. Now he works part-time as a dishwasher at Diane's Diner in Great Bend, and full-time as an artist.



Robert L. Joy

His favorite media are markers and colored pencils. A lot of his work goes into letters — and on the envelopes — that he mails to people around the world. He used poster paint for murals at Angel's in Great Bend and for a mural on the temporary wall at Barton Community College's Technical Building, put up during construction of a new addition. The metal sign required weatherproof enamel paint, which was a new experience. "It runs," Joy said.

Joy also self-publishes a monthly comic book, "The Old Guy," that sells for \$5 a copy at Great Bend Coffee Company. The Old Guy is a superhero who works as a dishwasher. "His superpower is his ability to (talk) his way out of everything," Joy said.

Issue No. 23 is being worked on now, Joy said. His wife helps with editing, and the pages Joy creates while sitting in his "big chair" are scanned into his computer.

Joy said when the Arts Council's board members first asked him to create a sign for the center, he turned

them down. He finally accepted the job after board members allowed him total artistic control. The only requirement was that the name of the Art Center appear on the sign.

The final result is a splash of colorful faces, birds, fish, snakes and dragonflies wrapped around the words. Joy mused about "hidden meanings" people may find, but said, "It speaks for itself."

A lot of work went into the sign before Joy picked up a paint brush. Wilda Merten, who used to own the Cottonwood Yard & Needle Craft store at 1312 Kansas Ave., donated the old sign from her store. Neuforth scraped the lettering off the sign and Great Bend artist Chet Cale — commissioned to create the statues in the future Kilby memorial — sanded the sign and painted it with white primer to serve as Joy's "canvas." Neuforth also set up a scaffold and secured the sign.

The actual painting started around the first of this month, and within four weeks it was done. Joy usually worked 30 minutes at a time, preferring to paint in private when the Arts Center was closed. When David Gaunt came in with his dog Daisy, she ended up as a figure in the painting. Neuforth's dog Emma is there, too.

Neuforth said the sign will appear in a float at the Ellinwood After Harvest Festival in July before it goes on the awning as a permanent addition to the Barton County Arts Center.

Joy said his work is slated to be displayed at the city art gallery in Baton Rouge, La., in September 2010. Former Great Bend resident Jay Ariaz is responsible for introducing his work to Louisiana.