

Joe Martin: Cartoonist Extraordinaire

The large crescent-shaped house on the south shore of Geneva Lake looks quiet, but inside hums a hive of creativity. This is the place where veteran cartoonist Joe Martin creates "Mr. Boffo," "Willy 'n Ethel," "Cats With Hands," "On The Edge" and other comic features. It's also where his syndicate Neatly Chiseled Features labors to make his ideas reach everyone in the world with a sense of humor.

Joe spends a good part of every day working on jokes and ideas in Lake Geneva's coffee shops. The atmosphere created by all sorts of people passing his table makes comic creation easier. Snippets of conversation can inspire one of his cartoons, or fully fledge an inspiration. Martin also relies on news reports, magazines, his family (including 11 grandchildren), his two cats, his friends, and his syndicate staff for additional inspiration. His comics are published internationally from Italy to Trinidad, and throughout the United States and Canada.

Never "Unclear on the Concept"

Joe was born on the South Side of Chicago. He launched his career early by drawing caricatures of his grade school teachers as devils. "I went to Catholic school," he says, green eyes glinting with humor. "They were easier to draw." Joe's classmates asked for autographed copies. His efforts foreshadowed Joe's future career.

He continued drawing throughout his school years, producing sketches of his classmates which they eagerly took home. Joe always had a pencil in hand; often his creations produced laughs from his peers. Such responses honed his sense of humor.

At the age of 16, Joe married and began a family. He worked days as a draftsman to support them, and finished school at night. He quit drafting in favor of working at an employment agency. By the time he was 20, Joe had a job, a diploma, four sons, and a divorce.

Joe used to shop at a downtown Chicago department store called Wiebols. He couldn't help but notice a lovely elevator operator there near his own age. Joe always stopped on the second floor of the three-story building. One day he asked her to let him out on the Fifth Floor. The young woman stopped at Two as usual, let him out, then as the doors closed said, "Next stop, Fifth Floor." It was, Joe claims, the "...beginning of a beautiful relationship." The woman's name was Marie Lubertozzi, and she was the offspring of an Italian family from Chicago. Their friendship grew over several years.

Joe began his own employment agency with two other partners in 1968. Located in the suburb of Elmwood Park, the business was called the Alumni Career Center. "Our office was situated at the top of a stairway and around a corner. It had a glass door," Martin recalls. "On slow days, we tried to see if we could get delivery people to run into that door." He flashes his boyish grin. "The work there was hard, but we were pretty successful." Joe asked Marie to come work for the business: their personal relationship grew alongside their professional one.

The couple was married in 1972, surrounded by 30 well-wishers. Joe claims that Marie is the most beautiful woman he's ever known. Marie fell in love with Joe's creativity and his sense of humor. She has supported her husband with devotion, understanding, and good Italian food ever since. They had one son, Jay.

Pencils, Determination, and Luck

Despite work that took him far from his dream, Joe never lost his vision of becoming a cartoonist. He submitted his comics to every publication from "Boy's Life" to "Playboy", receiving a mountain of rejections. Joe grabbed at what he thought was a good break when a friend said his uncle worked for the "Chicago Sun-Times" newspaper. "Do you think he'd look at my cartoon strip if I drew one?" Joe asked. "Sure," his friend answered.

For the next six months Joe slaved over comics involving Tucker, the owner of an employment agency. When the cartoon was polished, Joe was disappointed to find out that his friend's uncle only dispatched the newspaper's delivery trucks.. So he mailed the entire comic strip to the "Sun-Times", addressed to the editor.

"I had the luckiest thing happen," Joe shakes his head with wonder. "The day my strip arrived, a young man named Sherwood Kiraly was made Comic Editor. He read my work, called me up, and asked if I wanted to draw a feature." Cartoonists without experience were never offered such positions. "But he didn't know that. And I accepted." "Tucker's Job Emporium" finally appeared in the "Sun-Times", but not before Kiraly threatened to quit if the paper didn't publish the comic. "They started it two years after I sent it," states Joe.

The "Sun-Times" launched the career he'd always wanted. Joe became a syndicated cartoonist. He began other comics: "Porterfield" dealt with the funny side of business, and "Mr. Boffo" showed dry humor with a definite tilt toward "Worst Case Scenarios" and "People Unclear on the Concept". "Mr. Boffo" tickled funnybones across the nation, and was bought by other major newspapers. Currently, Joe Martin's cartoons are published by 13 of the 20 most prestigious newspapers in United States, including the "Boston Globe", the "San Francisco Chronicle", the "Detroit Free Press", the "Houston Chronicle", the "L.A. Times", and the "Chicago Tribune", among others. Hundreds of smaller papers also publish his features.

Going North

Because Joe loved family getaways to Lake Geneva when he was young, the Martins looked there for a home when they decided to move from Oak Park in 1985. They rented a house on the lake shore, where Joe loved to take walks. After deciding to stay in southern Wisconsin, they discovered Marie's "storybook house" in Fontana's Lower Gardens. Unfortunately, the atmosphere there did not inspire Joe: he could not write jokes there. Looking at available real estate, he found the extensive Loramoor Estate stable-turned-library for sale. It was scheduled for demolition. Joe looked at the historic 1901 English Tudor structure with the clock tower, and bought it in 1988.

"I saw the possibilities," Joe said. "Our house used to have 80 horses stabled here, all their tack, the carriages, and the staff that took care of all that. Then the Franciscans used it for their books. When we saw it, the place had been sitting empty for years. We had to do a lot of work inside, but now it's home." The house has enough space for the Martin's extensive family to swim, play tennis, go boating, watch movies, and have fun during summer months, separate from Joe's syndicate team concentrating on business in a loft office.

World Title

In 2001, Joe was named "The World's Most Prolific Cartoonist" by the *Guinness Book of World Records*. He's kept that title by expanding his features with "Willy 'n Ethel", "Cats With Hands", "Picks of the Week", and an unusual collaboration with Dr. Jon Carlson called "On The Edge" which uses humor and advice to help people through daily challenges.

Joe works seven days a week to keep up the volume of good jokes required by so many features. "After writing ideas down in a notebook, I pick the funniest ones and read them to Marie," Joe says. "She chooses the best ones, then I draw them. Those are the cartoons that go to the newspapers." There are piles of notebooks full of jokes stacked in several places in their house, as well as black and white hills of cartoons. Joe also has a prodigious memory regarding what he's previously drawn.

Neatly Chiseled Business

Even after his successes, Joe isn't slowing down. In 2005, he quit the Tribune Syndicate and began his own, launched on October 31. Neatly Chiseled Features is the first new syndicate formed in 20 years. Marie serves as president, supported by Matt McGuinness, Janet Deaver-Pack, Mark Marousek, a part-time sales staff, and a team of animators living in Wisconsin, Illinois, and New York. The business also sends Joe's cartoons out by email each morning to several hundred subscribers. The syndicate maintains an extensive 30,000 comic online archive of Joe's work.

During late 2006, after taking a hint from an editor at the "London Daily Mail", Joe took another historic step. He is the first cartoonist to successfully animate his daily features for online newspapers. These animations were published first by the "London Daily Mail", followed by the "Boston Globe". They are currently winning audiences throughout the United States and England.

What does Joe see in his future? "Neatly Chiseled Features is going to do lots of creative stuff," he grins. "We've got plans for all sorts of great things. Keep watch at the new business web site: announcements will be put up there."

Fans of Joe Martin and the curious can access the "Mr. Boffo" web page at www.mrboffo.com (it includes "Willy 'n Ethel"). "Cats With Hands" has its own web page at www.catswithhands.com. The new Neatly Chiseled Features site will soon be available at www.NeatlyChiseledFeatures.com.