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Committed to his art

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Dr. Donn Chatham, a native of Shelbyville, long has had a fascination with art, and now he uses that as a foundation for his practice of reconstructive medicine.

As a child, Dr. Donn Chatham would sit in the pews at First Baptist Church in Shelbyville and doodle. He recalls those Sundays that while his mother would play the organ or piano, he would sit next to his dad and doodle, which always got him into some Sunday trouble.



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Dr. Donn Chatham has in his office this inlaid wood picture that hung for 40 years in the office in Shelbyville of his father, Dr. Donald Chatham.

He says he would stop doodling and try as he might to concentrate on the sermon, but he inevitably became transfixed by the geometric patterns in the stained glass windows that adorned the church.

These days, Chatham, a 1967 graduate of Shelbyville High School – and a proud Red Devil, he will tell you – is still paying close attention to patterns and does a doodling of a different sort.

He practices facial and reconstructive surgery at offices in Louisville and Southern Indiana, and he recently completed his term as president of the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery.

And he says his early artistic “doodling” – and a lifetime appreciation of art – still comes into play.

Working with his hands began early in Chatham’s life, be it drawing, working with clay r making plant stands and Christmas gifts for his friends and family.

He once made a sand art picture of Abraham Lincoln and entered it in the Shelby County Fair. His drawings of Daniel Boone shooting at the Indians found a prominent place in the halls of his elementary school.

“I was really good at drawing battle scenes,” he says.

“In college at Georgetown College, I majored in psychology. I didn’t think I was good enough to make a living with art. I did have a double minor in biology and art.”

Artistic heritage

Chatham’s parents, Betty and the late Dr. Don Chatham, who practiced medicine in Shelbyville for 40 years, certainly appreciated the arts and famously made them available to their five children.

“My dad could draw fairly well, and my mother has traveled the world as a concert pianist and toured with Billy Graham,” he says.

Art was prevalent in their home, and Chatham says he remembers going to Nassau as a child and his parents purchasing an oil painting of a Bahamian scene. That painting hung in his parent’s house, and it was always a gentle reminder to him of the trip with his parents.

Sometimes, history does repeat itself.

Several months ago, Chatham was in Boston at a medical conference, to which his wife, Janet, son, Andrew, and daughter, E.B., accompanied him.

“I snuck out of the conference for a day, and we drove up to Cape Cod, where there is a town named Chatham. It was a lovely seaside town,” he says.

“My daughter, E.B. noticed a street artist, and we all struck up a conversation. The artist suggested that he paint our family in the picture – which he did. Now we own that painting, and I hope one day my kids will want that picture to remember our day in Chatham and appreciate the art.”

While Chatham did take cello lessons and played in a band he believes most of the musical talent in his family went to his four sisters: Sarah, Martha, Emily and Jeane.

While in his residency in Memphis, Chatham did play in a band with other residents.

The band was named the Pacemakers, and Chatham played his Fender Starcaster guitar, which he purchased at a pawn shop.

“We basically played for free or for beer. We did record our best songs at the Sun Recording Studio. That is the place as such icons as Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis recorded,” he said.

Art to medicine

But then life got more a bit more serious.

After medical school at University of Louisville and residency programs in Alabama and Tennessee, Chatham moved back to Kentucky in 1985 and began his plastic surgery practice.

Currently he has hospital privileges in 10 hospitals and surgery centers and has served as a clinical professor in the Department of Otolaryngology at the University of Louisville.

“It has been interesting to learn and study facial aesthetics as it deals with art,” he says. “This has come from art books, as far as balance and proportion. Look at some ancient Egyptian paintings, Greek sculptures, Roman frescos: Commonality is about balance and what was attractive. It is all about balance and symmetry.”

Chatham says he has been fortunate in being able to travel to such world renowned museums as the Van Gogh in Amsterdam, He has seen Michelangelo paintings in Florence, Italy, visited the Prado in Spain and has purchased art for his collections in these places as well as the St. James Art Fair in Louisville.

And he says he carries that appreciation with him into his plastic surgery.

“The two parts of what I do is...number one, aesthetic, to improve feature and appearance, the second part is reconstructive and that is to restore – they often overlap. If you restore you often are making it look better as well.

“Every face is a little bit different. It is biological facial anatomy art. Then there is the function issue. The nose is the most challenging – when you study facial aesthetics and anatomy – we are trying to achieve same ascetics that have been there for a thousand years yet make something work and function.”

He has taken his artistic judgment and medical science and helped those in need of facial reconstruction because of domestic violence. He along with other specialists in this field has traveled to Croatia to perform surgery on children with deformed faces and soldiers who were wounded in the Balkan War.

And, still, believe it or not, he still manages to doodle.

Last year the magazine *Facial Plastic Times* published twelve of his doodles as cartoons.