



James Bessey, 89, in his Stouffville home studio. He will be honoured at an arts event at EastRidge church next Thursday.

STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

ARTIST JAMES BESSEY'S CAREER HONOURED AT STOUFFVILLE ARTS SHOWCASE NEXT WEEK

Portrait of a painting legend

BY SANDRA BOLAN
Staff Writer

James Bessey always dabbled in the arts, including woodworking and music. But it was painting that Mr. Bessey really loved.

However, it wasn't until a co-worker of Mr. Bessey's, whom he admired for his artistic capabilities, suggested he buy some basic art supplies, take some classes and give painting a try that his career got started.

Mr. Bessey bought oil paints, but quickly realized he was allergic to them, so he switched to water colour.

That was back in 1962 when Mr. Bessey was 42 and well entrenched in his career as the secretary of the Canadian Gas Association.

But thanks to some lessons and weekends away with the boys — to paint — Mr. Bessey became accomplished in his own right.

Ten years after buying that paint set, Mr. Bessey held his first art show, at the Consumers Gas building in downtown Toronto.

"They were very supportive of my work

when I did get going," the now 89-year-old said of his former employer.

"I was encouraged by a lot of people in the industry (and) if things didn't work out with painting, I was welcome back to the industry."

Mr. Bessey never returned to the gas company or took any other job, for that matter.

Mr. Bessey admires the work of the Group of Seven, along with that of realist Alex Colville, landscape painter Doris McCarthy and wildlife artist Robert Bateman, although he himself is a pure naturalist.

"My basic philosophy to art and feeling things in nature is: hug a tree, smell a flower (and) listen to a brook," Mr. Bessey said. "It's nice when you have that quiet time to reflect upon nature."

At the height of Mr. Bessey's artistic career, he and his wife would travel across Canada in search of that perfect spot to set up the easel for the day.

Nova Scotia quickly became Mr. Bessey's favourite place to paint.

The east coast was also the inspiration for

'We wanted to acknowledge his contribution to the community. He's a very good painter, but also a very lovely man.'

Maura Broadhurst
curator for the Latcham Gallery

his wife June's favourite painting — a moored yellow dory on a foggy morning.

Mrs. Bessey wasn't the only one to take a liking to that particular piece as someone visiting their home a few years back loved it so much she bought it off their living room wall. It's the only painting Mrs. Bessey regrets selling.

Since 1981, the Besseys have called Stouffville home and for about 20 years, his work was annually showcased at the Latcham Gallery. That was when Mr. Bessey could churn out a painting a week.

Now, Mr. Bessey creates about one a

month and only has a few pieces available for sale through the Stouffville Picture Framing Studio on Main Street.

"He doesn't have the stamina for it anymore," Mrs. Bessey said. "It takes a lot of emotional and physical stamina in order to paint and I don't think people realize that."

Mr. Bessey will, however, showcase his work once again on a grand scale during the Showcase in the Stouffville Arts benefit for the Lebovic Centre for Arts and Entertainment — Nineteen on the Park — next week.

"We wanted to acknowledge his contribution to the community," said Maura Broadhurst, curator for the Latcham Gallery. "He's a very good painter, but also a very lovely man."

Showcase of Stouffville in the Arts takes place Thursday, Feb. 19. A visual arts presentation begins at 6:30 p.m., followed by a concert by Jack de Kyzer at 7:15 p.m.

Tickets are \$15 each and available at We Rock School of Music, York Dance Academy, Latcham Gallery, the Lebovic Leisure Centre and the mayor's office (905-640-1900).

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