

A Matter of Chance and Choice

A Story of an Artist, Three Schools, and a Yearbook

The Artist at Home

On a dog day in July, Laurie Munn, a 58-year-old, lithe, brown-eyed, blond-haired artist from Tarrytown, New York, started her day a few minutes before 6:00, as usual. Sitting on one of the two IHOP booths she purchased at the diner's close-out sale (and then painted with her own 1950s designs) for her summer home, she sipped cappuccino unhurriedly before setting off to meet two friends for an early-morning, four-mile walk on the beach. This is part of her routine before she shuts herself into her light-filled and airy studio to paint for the rest of the day.

Looking around her equally light-filled and airy kitchen, accented with a mix of fun period purchases and her signature artwork, one is not surprised that Laurie has a colorful story—a story talked about in the art world, media, Broadway, Hollywood and, yes, even the *Hyde Alumni News*. It's a story with as many facets as a cut stone—each one in its own way adding to the luster of the whole gem.



IHOP booths painted with Laurie's designs serve as a breakfast nook in her summer home.



Laurie Munn holds cut-outs of her parents that she painted.

School the First—Hyde

Laurie believes her story had its “beginning,” during the summer of 2000, when she and her husband Max, having reached the end of their rope in dealing with their son Alex’s ‘05 Bath teenage rebellion, arrived on the Woodstock campus for an interview

Laurie describes the admission interview as one of the most “difficult exercises my family had ever encountered,” saying with a well-suited tone of mischievous humor that “Max failed the first interview” “We couldn’t believe it,” she says. “Here we are thinking that we can drop off Alex and let this school fix his problems and that will be it.”

But they were all sent home and found themselves back at Hyde (in Bath this time) the following year for a re-interview because, as Laurie adds with the same playful tone, “Max can’t stand to fail.” Round two played out favorably for the Munns. Alex was enrolled in Summer Challenge and Laurie and Max, relieved to finally have their son plugged into the program, returned home.

Fast forward to the following summer: Full of vinegar, Alex’s first year at Hyde primarily consisted of attitude, rather than academic lessons—a typical scenario for

new students. Falling behind in his studies, Alex enrolled in a five-week summer academic program at Hyde. During the program’s culminating event, Family Weekend, a time when groups of families meet for honest, self-searching dialogue, Laurie would reach a pivotal point in her life.

In preparation for the first family seminar, members of the group were asked to address the question, “What would your life look like if there were no such thing as fear of failure?” Laurie told the group about how she regretted dropping out of graduate school decades earlier because of her fear of having to defend her artwork in front of a panel of judges. “They were very vicious,” she says. “I lacked the confidence to do what they were asking of me and so I dropped out. I always regretted that decision.”

Without hesitation, Alex yielded to his own curiosity and asked a question that proved to be a major catalyst in his mother’s life. As Laurie recalls, “I was sitting in this room with all eyes pointed at me and Alex asked me, ‘Mom, you’re asking me to do this hard thing at Hyde and I want to drop out, so why aren’t you challenging yourself?’”

For a moment, everything stopped. The room, a tabernacle of silence, suddenly felt too small. Telling the truth bluntly, Laurie realized, may not have been nearly as cathartic for Alex as it was for her; yet his words, aimlessly bouncing around in her mind like pinballs, soon grew to a thought—to an idea—and eventually to an act. Without knowing it, Alex had tossed his mother a key that would unshackle her will and allow her to pursue one of her dreams.

The Artist in Youth

As a young child, Laurie grew up in Southern California, where she and her family lived comfortably until she was 14. Her parents’ decision to move to Switzer-



Laurie's paintings of her family members rest on her mantle in her summer home.

land at that time came as a “devastating” shock to Laurie.

“I couldn’t appreciate the excitement of it. It felt like a bad time in my life to have to move. I didn’t want to leave my friends, my school, my life. From that point forward, I felt as though I missed out on the social scene, that whole Donna Reed thing, where you got to go out with friends, go to the prom, and graduate with a class.”

Laurie would remain in Europe throughout her teens and early 20s. She received a diploma from the Sorbonne and, later, studied architecture and interior design in

London and Rome. In 1968, she moved back to the United States and enrolled in the Maryland Institute College of Art, where she earned a BFA degree. Soon after, she made the decision to enroll in a masters of fine arts program at Queens College. It was there that Laurie, overcome with a fear of failure, made the “regrettable” decision to drop out of school.

The Artist in Progress

But Laurie’s interest in art never waned. A self-described “theme” artist, she created and sold silk-screened t-shirts portraying various Miss Subway ads, which ended up in New York City subway cars in the early ‘70s. In her summer home, countless photos, drawings, and paintings depict well-known children’s book characters she created for her children’s parties and events when they were growing up. In fact, much of the artwork Laurie created was inspired by her family, which besides Max and Alex, consists of her daughter Molly and dog, Terry

One series of portraits covers the walls of her stairway and depicts all 43 of the U.S. Presidents, including a George W Bush with a less than proper expression. Laurie explains, “In seventh grade, Alex was assigned to memorize all of the Presidents in order. He had a difficult time memorizing the days of the week and was afraid he couldn’t do it. I decided to help him by painting one portrait every day so

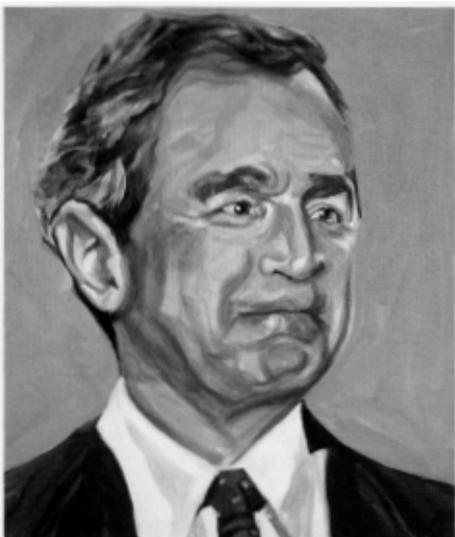
that when he came home from school there would be a new one waiting for him. After three days, Alex gave up because he was bored with the game. But I thought they were so intriguing I continued until they were finished.”

The paintings hung in Laurie’s home until a year after 9-11 when New York City officials organized a huge art show to generate interest in the financial redevelopment of downtown New York.

“The curator of the show heard I had painted the Presidents’ portraits and came over to see them,” she says. He took one look at them and said ‘You’re in the show’ because he felt they were the perfect representation of the country’s history. When I told him I had painted a formal portrait of the current President Bush, he told me not to show that one—that the other portrait was unique and more fun.” Critics, including those from the *New York Times*, wrote very favorably of Laurie’s work.

School the Second: the School of Visual Arts

It is, of course, conceivable that the success of the 9-11 art show primed Laurie for that



Laurie's informal portrayal of George W. Bush.



Laurie's portraits of the U.S. Presidents received favorable reviews after being displayed at an art show in Manhattan's financial district.



An old hairdryer painted with Laurie's designs is used as seating in her kitchen.

timely query posed by Alex during the Hyde family seminar just one month later.

Buoyed by the support and encouragement she had received during her exhibition, Laurie announced at the final family seminar that she was going back to graduate school. Even today, Laurie has a difficult time concealing the marvel she felt at her own gutsiness.

"I just blurted **it** out. Everybody in the room stared at me, even Max and Alex who had no idea I was considering **it**. On the drive home from Bath to New York, all I could talk about was graduate school."

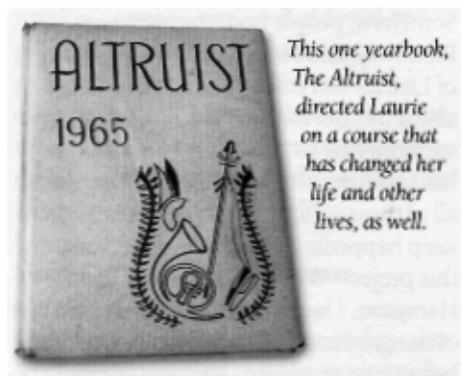
Not long after she completed applications to graduate schools, Laurie began to receive replies. "I applied to four schools, and the rejections started coming in," she says. "I was even told by the people at Columbia University that I was too old, that the program was too difficult, and the competition was too great." It is hard to imagine anyone referring to Laurie as old. The aura of youthful, boundless energy that emanates from her is in near-perfect harmony with the fit physique that houses **it**.

It took her a week to open the final letter, which came from the School of Visual Arts (SVA), but Laurie was boosted back to hopefulness when she read that SVA had placed her first on its waiting list. Within a few weeks, she received a call that she had been accepted. Excitedly, she started preparing for graduate school.

Part of her preparations involved revisiting old boxes of art supplies and personal items that she had stored away decades earlier. On top of one of the piles that Laurie was going through lay a high school yearbook titled *The Altruist*. Upon picking it up, Laurie was taken back to that auspicious day, many years before, when she had first found **it**....

The Yearbook

It was 1980. Laurie's first attempt at graduate school was far behind her. She was now married and living in Chelsea. One day, walking down her street, she noticed a discarded yearbook. It was from Emerson High and was dated 1965—the same year Laurie should have, could have, always wished she would have graduated with her own high school class. "On this street were the contents of someone's life," she says. "It was as if someone had indiscriminately thrown all of **it** out of an apartment window. On the top of the heap was this yearbook with the name *The Altruist*. I picked **it** up and started looking at **it**; and I fell in love with the pictures in **it**. The people, the scenes looked like what I had imagined my class would have looked like."



Laurie took the yearbook home with her and spent hours combing through pages, admiring hairstyles, fashions, and scenes of football games and the prom. Old feelings of unlived dreams and dashed hopes

surfaced: "I spent a lot of time with the yearbook, but eventually packed **it** away, moved to the suburbs, and went about raising a family

More than 20 years later, Laurie found herself once again holding *The Altruist*. Looking **it** over with the same intense interest she felt when she first found **it**, Laurie decided to take **it** with her to graduate school, where, for her first year, when "professors leave you alone and let you do your own thing," she painted a series of portraits of people from the yearbook, similar to those she had done of the Presidents.

"I didn't paint them in any order," she says. I just painted what was funny to me. I conceptualized **it** and thought, 'How great, I can bring this yearbook to life in a colorful way and bring back a time in my life I didn't get to experience.'" Using the same technique she had used with her other theme projects, Laurie painted students, teachers, coaches, and scenes and in doing so captured a piece of her past she felt she had lost.

By the beginning of her second year, Laurie had created 50 paintings, but the honeymoon was over. Her professors, now ready to see what she could really do, urged her to do something more challenging. So, "turning an obstacle into an opportunity," Laurie borrowed a video camera and scheduled a visit to Emerson High in Union City, New Jersey, the original home of *The Altruist*.

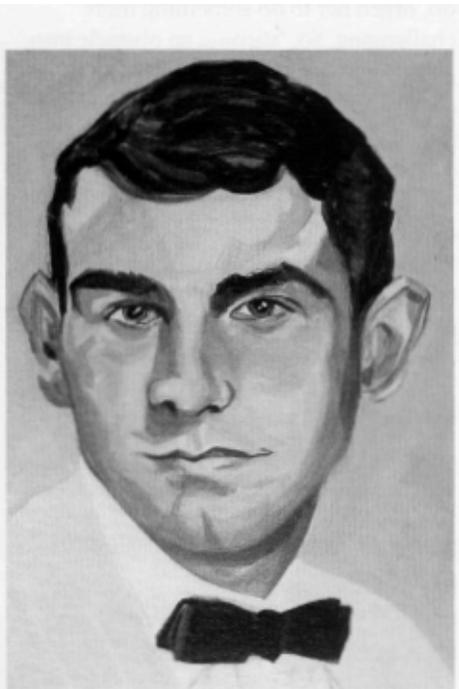
School the Third: Emerson High School

"I had the great fortune of walking into the school and meeting one of the students in the yearbook who is now a teacher there—Richard Ardito. After noting he was being filmed, he asked me why I was carrying *his* yearbook. When I told him what I was doing and that I had painted his portrait, he was speechless. I was so shocked—both because **it** was him and he looked so different from the young man whose portrait I'd painted—that I made him show me his license!"

Laurie's yearbook, **it** emerged, belonged to Bernard (Bernie) Becker, a 1965 graduate of Emerson High. Pointing out Becker's

name on the cover page, Ardito sadly revealed that Becker, having learned he was extremely ill, (most likely an early victim of the AIDS epidemic), took his life in 1980. ‘You couldn’t have scripted anything more dramatic. Richard read Bernie’s name and told me they had been close friends, and then he told me the whole story That explained why all of Bernie’s personal belongings had been thrown on the street the day I found his yearbook.’”

It is because of Richard Ardito that Laurie has met at least 40 people from Emerson High’s class of ’65, and she managed to videotape all of the meetings. “One thing has led to another,” she says. “Richard and I are good friends and I’ve made many other friends from the class. They called me when the principal of the school in the ’60s died; they invite me to their barbecues. It’s as though I’ve imposed myself into their class and because of that it has reconnected classmates and rekindled friendships that have been dormant for the past four decades. I’ve become so close to these people they’ve actually adopted me as an honorary member of their class. I’m even helping to plan the 40th reunion!”



Laurie’s portrait of Bernie Becker.



Some of the portraits of Emerson High’s Class of ’65 hang in the back of Laurie’s studio. They will be displayed at the class’s 40th reunion in November.

Convergence

In May, Laurie graduated from SVA with a master’s degree, a momentous occasion in light of her long-desired dream to be a member of a class. Her family, including her mother who still lives in Europe, attended her graduation. Alex graduated from Hyde less than a month later. While at the podium presenting his graduation speech, he addressed his mother, telling her how proud he was of her accomplishments and courage to return to graduate school.

Somehow, people from the media, Broadway, and Hollywood caught wind of Laurie’s story. She shrugs when asked about this development, as though surrendering to “this thing” she believes has taken on a life of its own. “There are all of these inexplicable coincidences that keep happening as a result of me pursuing this project. While riding on the bus to Hampton, I had a chance meeting with one of the producers of *The Sopranos*, and she’s become an invaluable resource to me. I found out her sister is the wife of my cousin. I’ve also learned that Tony Orlando, before he was famous, was very present at Emerson High in the mid-’60s. He played at the dances, and he may even come to the 40th reunion. I recently

learned that my good friend’s aunt (pronounced ant) is Tony’s mother. Isn’t this a metaphor for life? You really aren’t in control as a parent or of much else.” Regardless of the many uncanny offshoots attached to Laurie’s story her primary focus remains the same and is unwavering; she will complete all 220 portraits for the Emerson High class of ’65 reunion. By the time this story goes to press, she will have reached her goal.

“I have to keep painting them,” she says. “I never intended for this to be an altruistic effort, but it is. As one of my professors said to me, this has become a community-based project. I’ve involved an entire community and it’s significantly impacted others’ lives as well as my own. And how amazing it is that Bernie Becker was the photographic editor of the Emerson High newspaper. In a way I’m finishing what he started and I think he would have really liked that.”

Her experiences with the yearbook have led Laurie Munn—artist, wife, mother, human being—to make lasting connections with three institutions, the people who inhabit them and, perhaps most significantly with her own hidden potential. **HYDE**