

**MOST**



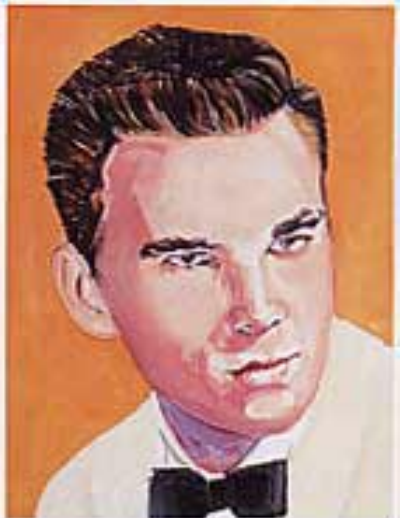
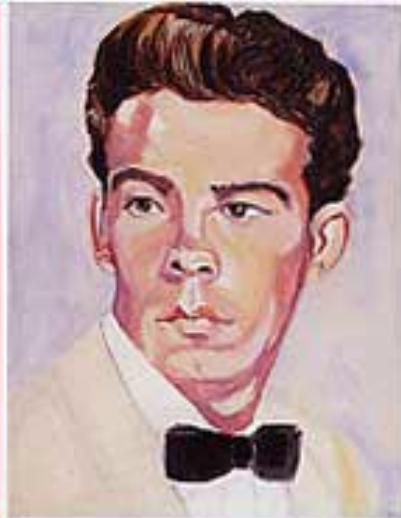
**LIKELY**







TO



SUCCEED



By James S. Harrison





How did Laurie Munn, the mother of two nearly grown children, find herself working toward a master's degree in fine arts at SVA and, in the process, focusing on a high school in northern New Jersey? Well, in a way, maybe it can all be traced back to two quite unrelated things: a provocative question brought home from school by her son a few years ago, and a discarded high school yearbook Munn had once found on a Manhattan sidewalk.

But we have to go back more or less to the beginning: after living in Southern California during her childhood years, Munn's family transplanted itself to Switzerland when she was 14, a move she describes as particularly wrenching. "Since I went to school in Geneva during my teenage years," she says, "I always knew that I had missed out on a lot of Donna Reed-type, all-American stuff — stuff I had grown to really like — and it's always felt like that left some holes that needed to be filled."

The family remained in Europe, and Munn got a diploma from the Sorbonne in Paris, then studied architecture and interior design in London and in Rome. Moving back to the U.S. in 1968, she enrolled in the Maryland Institute College of Art and got a BFA degree in '72. Then she enrolled in Queens College and began work on a master's degree in fine arts, but after a few months — in a crucial decision, mostly having to do, she says, with fear of failure — she dropped out. "That," she says, "made another empty hole."

Fearful or not, her creative endeavors continued, even after she got married and had children. "I once turned the living room into a 'stage set' for a Wizard of Oz-theme birthday party," she says. In fact, Munn has always kept a hand firmly in the world of art. Once, in the early 1970s ("in the pop art era") she created (and sold) hundreds of silk-screened T-shirts based on the Miss Subways ads that appeared in New York City subway cars. Another project around that time was a group of paintings inspired by an old

family photo album — perhaps a precursor to her current master's work — she blew up the pictures, then painted and collaged them. And once, after she and her family moved to the suburbs in 1986, she built a kind of "installation piece" in her new home, made up of booths, tables and chairs salvaged from an International House of Pancakes that was being remodeled.

Fast forward to a day a couple of years ago when Munn's teenage son, Alex, came home from school and told the family about a question his class had been asked to answer that day: "What would you do with your life if there were no such thing as fear or failure?" Laurie Munn says she's not sure what answer Alex came up with, but the query set the wheels turning in her head and she thought back to the reasons she had dropped out of graduate school all those years before. Somehow a light bulb went off, and a few weeks later she announced to her family that she was going to go back to school and get her master's degree. Everyone cheered. So in the fall of 2003 Munn found herself "The oldest graduate student at SVA."

And now the discarded yearbook enters the picture. The *Altruist*, as the book is called, had belonged to one Bernard Becker of the 1965 graduating class of Emerson High in Union City, N.J. (his name is embossed in gold on the cover) and was full of pictures of football games, prom nights, beauty queen contests and activities clubs — the "Donna Reed" things Munn always felt she'd been denied. Over the years, she had occasionally thumbed through the volume and vicariously lived those events, and now she thought once again of *The Altruist* — and found a built-in subject for her master's project.

Using the photos from the book, she set out to tell her own story of life in a mid-1960s high school, concentrating on the "head shots" of the graduates. As she had the family photos years before, she took the small black-and-white pictures, blew them up with an opaque projector onto 16"x20"

canvases, drew the images in charcoal, then painted them in acrylic. Soon there were not only many portraits of the 1965 graduates, but paintings of teachers and coaches and various school goings-on as well. Here was Richard Ardito (“a man of his word,” the book said); Jeanne Matthies (“a diverting conversationalist”); and Ron Sirianni (“a formidable character”).

One day toward the end of Munn’s second semester, after she’d completed some 50 or so pictures of the graduates (her original goal was to paint all 220 of them), her instructor said to her, “Your paintings are great, but you need a new challenge. Find a different way to tell your story.”

In fact, Munn had often thought of actually visiting Emerson High, and maybe now the time had come. And if she videotaped the event, she thought... So she got in touch with the principal’s office, described her project and asked if she could visit the school — with her video camera. She was given the go-ahead, and one day early last fall she made what turned out to be the first of many trips to Union City, and began adding video images to her project of “reuniting” the class of ‘65.

She was first given a tour of the school (“It was just like I’d thought it would be,” says Munn) and then the principal invited her into his office, saying “I’d like you to meet one of my colleagues.” To her amazement, a few minutes later she was being introduced to Richard Ardito. Ardito, it turned out, had been a teacher at the school almost since he graduated from college. “I hardly knew what to say,” Munn says. “I told him about finding the book and about deciding to go to SVA, about the pictures I’d painted of him and everybody else. Then he said to me, ‘Hold on a minute.’” Ardito left the room and returned a few minutes later with Ron Sirianni, also an Emerson teacher, in tow.

Now in a state of near shock, Munn could see that Emerson High was coming alive in a whole new and unexpected way. Through Ardito and Sirianni, she met — and videotaped — many other ‘60s grads: Joseph “Babe” De Santis, owner of a bar in nearby Cliffside Park; Frank “Cisco” Maniscalco, CEO of a New Jersey-based bank; Emil Ranaudo, a former football star; Frannie Galdini (“most popular” in the

class of ‘65), a beautician in a hair salon not far from the school; Roger Schmitt, recently retired from a teaching post at another school.

And so Munn and her camera have become familiar figures around the school (she has more than 20 hours of raw footage, and a 15-minute video, so far) — and the holes are being filled in. She took her camera to Emerson’s annual sports award dinner in October (John Murano, a 1960s-era coach at the school, was there, among other Munn subjects) and also to a reunion of the class of 1964, which lots of 1965ers also attended. One sad note: Along the way, Munn learned that Bernard Becker had died years ago, probably an early victim of the AIDS epidemic. She speculates that *The Altruist* was discarded after his death.

As this story goes to press, Munn is about to embark on her thesis project, but she’s not sure exactly what form it’s going to take. One possibility for part of the project is to do something that seems simultaneously radical, modern and eminently traditional: “outsource” the painting of the remaining 1965 graduate portraits to an “atelier.” She has discovered a source in China that will take photocopies of the small black-and-white images taken from *The Altruist* and hand-paint them in acrylics in the same style and manner as the sample she has sent. “They look almost as if I’d done them,” she says. “All I do is send them off and back they come. I’d never have the time to do all 220 by myself, so this is one way to get it done.” To those who say this is “cheating,” she points out that artists from Peter Paul Rubens to Andy Warhol have had apprentices who did a lot of “their” work.

Another route her thesis work might take is a “full circle” approach. She might just republish a new, paper version of *The Altruist*, using her images, of course.

While the demographics of Union City have changed in recent years, and the Emerson student body is mostly Hispanic these days, its needs keep growing, and the old football stadium (Pep Novatny Field) is scheduled for demolition to make way for badly needed new classroom facilities. It will mark the end of an era for Emerson High (the eponymous Novatny was a much-revered coach at the school, who was strongly identified with its football team). While the demolition will take place too late for inclusion in Munn’s master’s project, she, and her camera, will definitely be on hand for the event.