NNB News : 2014 : 06 : 25 : Veteran news artist likes to start with a place and a photo

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Veteran news artist likes to start with a place and a photo

BY JACOB COONFARE

NNB Student Reporter

ST. PETERSBURG – The desk sits in a corner framed by two large windows with a view of St. Petersburg rooftops. Cartoons and drawings that illustrate stories from a range of categories hang on the wall between the windows. Well-thumbed books with titles like Art Deco and News Design sit neatly on a shelf.

Courtesy of Don Morris

News artist Don Morris
The desk belongs to Don Morris, assistant news art director for the Tampa Bay Times.

For 26 years, he has illustrated stories in the Times with work that ranges from simple, one-column maps to extravagant, multi-day sketches that dominate the paper.

Regardless of the topic, Morris believes the most important thing about every piece is the story it tells the reader.

“People see images everywhere they look,” said Morris, 59. “When you look at a newspaper it better look good, but those pictures and illustrations better tell a story.”

It often starts with a place and a photo.

Morris begins the illustration process by going to the location of the story and taking photos. Then he returns to his desk to sketch out the photos and begin brainstorming.

“I love to go out and sketch things and write down what I’m sketching,” Morris said.

For a story on Greenlight Pinellas, a proposed project that supporters say would improve public transportation in the county, Morris could be found traveling on the bus daily to get a feel for how the bus system worked. He then sketched ideas on his pad.

While the story easily lends itself to visuals, Morris said, there was another reason for riding the bus.

“I admit I’m not the most objective about it (the Greenlight Pinellas proposal),” he said. “I want to go out and find the facts and report them.”

In 2013, Morris and reporter Michael Kruse collaborated on a three-day series on the final voyage of the Bounty, which sank off the coast of North Carolina during Hurricane Sandy in October 2012, killing two of the 16 crew members. He, Kruse, Lee Glynn, Alexis Sanchez and Maurice Rivenbark built an interactive, scrolling website that is organized into chapters to read like a book. Morris’ sketches and paintings of the ship dot the pages as if taken from a ship engineer’s notebook.
Morris says it was rewarding to get a month to work on the project.

That “was a real joy,” he said. “It is the epitome of what the Times can do.”

Morris doesn’t work exclusively for the newspaper. He also freelances. One of his art projects was for Chick-fil-A. He illustrated the Virtue Valley Tales, children’s books that tell the stories of animals that discover their inner courage, initiative and joy.

The Chick-fil-A project and other freelance art projects were arranged by Morris’ agents.

“As artists, we tend to downgrade ourselves and not ask what we’re worth,” he said. “That’s where agents come in. My agents are kind of the middle man in the whole thing.”

As a news artist, Morris wants to continue to use his gift as a way to tell stories. He hopes to see more long-term projects. He also wants to see more interactive websites and graphics.

He says this would help push art at the Times in a new direction – something he hopes to lead.

“I want the last years of my career to be devoted to pushing art at the Times in a new direction,” he said. “Use what you’re good at as your tool to tell a story.”