Spotlight On...

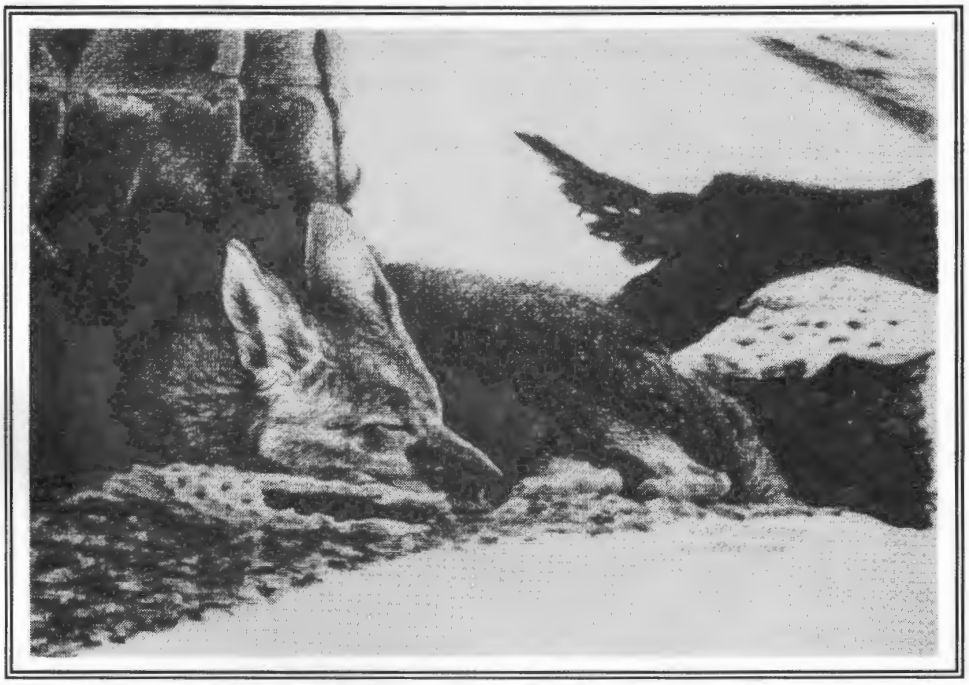
Benny McAdams is a local Portland artist and fellow calligrapher. I first met Benny at a February Menucha several years ago when he was guest instructor and gave us a brief workshop in colored pencil for calligraphers. Having saved one of my famous overly-involved projects for that Menucha, I didn't really spend a lot of time as part of the workshop. I had bought a couple of the Prisma colored pencils listed on the supply list and did one or two of the exercises but soon the intricateness of a Celtic knotwork border drew me back into its clutches and I gave no more thought to colored pencils.

Several years passed and I came across a colored pencil drawing class in the Portland Community College schedule with a McAdams listed as the instructor. Remembering the description of "colors that glowed" and " rich transparencies" from that particular Menucha, I showed up at the initial class meeting to see if it was the same instructor. It was! That was two years ago and I'm still hanging in there, sharpening my pencils and my sense of color. When P.C.C. upped the enrollment minimum for the first class session the second year and we were short a couple of bodies, we formed our drawing group and arranged with Benny to teach us. We met at one of the student's home and drew and drew and drew.

Maggie Rogers, Benny McAdams, and Julie Lay.

Benny is a wonderful and talented artist and is also a fine teacher; two traits that do not always go together. He received part of his art training at the art school of the University of Texas as Austin and almost got his B.A. in art but that last year changed his major to English. "I was very glad I did," he says. "That way, art school didn't ruin my art. I learned a lot of technique and ways of doing my own research and both those things were very, very valuable. I also had a lettering course way back in my first year in college in East Texas and it was under a wonderful teacher, Gaddis Geeslin. I'm still picking up on that course and incorporating some of it's techniques. . . but in the pencil of course. It was mostly drawn letters, built up letters. So I was already predisposed toward built up letters.

In 1980, Benny left Texas to come to Portland to study Italic under Jaki Svaren. "I loved her beautiful, elegant letterforms, and it was the most natural thing on earth to start translating them to colored pencil, because I've always used colored pencil. . . I've always used pencil, and ever since I've been an adult,



Recent drawings by Benny McAdams.

colored pencil. And all the techniques that I've used both for myself and in teaching are techniques that I've learned myself simply because I wanted to produce a certain effect and I didn't know anybody that was doing it, so I had to invent a technique myself. I had to just . . . roll it over in my mind and think what would produce this technique the best. So that's the way that a lot of these techniques were born."

Benny loves doing lettering in just about any medium but he finds that the colored pencil medium is much more responsive almost affectionate and cooperative. " It's as if the artwork is working through me" he says of the feeling. Benny is a firm believer in good, sound construction of letterforms and loves to share those secrets. "Practice is everything in calligraphy," he believes. Benny writes all his notes and lists in italic to keep in practice. Benny writes a lot and showed me a long narrative poem on Gandi that he is currently working on, written in italic. "It's not a particularly studied or formal italic but it's a fairly slow and steady pace of italic; which allows me to think slowly enough to think thoughtfully, and so it's very conducive to writing." Besides drawing and Italic, Benny is fond of traditional and modern versals. He taught both at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico last year.

Benny came to teaching by way of being drafted to teach workshops by others seeing his work. He says he loves to doodle. He did some combinations of col-

ored pencil lettering on marbling and also combining that with drawings. Eventually he developed techniques to do direct lettering such as italic and other forms that have traditional thicks and thins with the colored pencil. Benny often works on black paper because it makes the colors so luminous and jewel-like. Also with the texture of the paper, if you don't completely fill in the depressions in white paper, (the pores), it looks misty and out of focus. With the black paper the pores add a richness and depth, and look more a part of the drawing.

Benny is a very forgiving and gentle teacher. Besides bearing with my numerous absences and sneaking in late during the first year of class (i.e. a very demanding job schedule), he never made me feel that I wasn't welcome or couldn't "catch up" missed classes. He gives his students a lot of individual attention and lets them work at their own pace. There is no fear in his classes. He says "I don't ever want to violate the student's integrity. I ask before touching their drawings."

Anyone is welcome to come to our group's drawing session on Thursday nights; from experienced drawers to those who have never worked with colored pencil. We meet at Maggie's house where she provides space and hot tea. You'll find us scattered about the house; at the dinning room table, in the living room, visiting with Maggie as she works in her study (we sometimes get sidetracked into discussions on mushrooms) and checking out each others drawings. Benny often works a little bit on each of our drawings to show us new techniques. This year we are a little more informal and are doing the class as a drop-in drawing tutorial rather than a totally structured class. Benny says he would also like to get together a similar group to study calligraphy with the colored pencil. "I'd love nothing better than to have an ongoing calligraphy class in which we could explore the things we wanted to." This fall, Benny will be working to have the community colleges pick up his courses as offerings in their class schedules. He will also continue to teach workshops including one in Alberta, Canada in April; in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in May; and in Tucson, Arizona in June.

Benny's current projects include a series of narrative poems, the "Lamb Piece" (as we, his students, called it); a large rendering of a mother and baby sheep surrounded with snatches of related calligraphy all in colored pencil which Benny recently completed for Portland resident and calligrapher Pam Walker, and the most recent project he's been asked to do: painting a poem that he's composed and the names of loved ones lost on a large metal pipe to be rung to convene special wisdom-circle gatherings.

There will be a show featuring Benny's calligraphy and pencil works all during the month of March1-April 5 at the First Unitarian Church, 1011 SW 12th Street, Portland, Oregon. Call the church at 228-6389 for show hours.

Benny will also be teaching a class focusing on colored pencil and calligraphy at Calligraphy Northwest this summer.

Anyone wanting information about his classes, workshops and/or private lessons can contact Benny at 923 SE 13th #2, Portland, OR 97214. Telephone (503) 235-3055.

The Thursday night drawing group meets from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Maggie Rogers' house located at 1943 SE Locust Avenue in Portland. It's off of Hawthorn Blvd. and 20th (there's a 7-11 on the corner). Maggie's number is 239-4321. Call ahead for directions and to make sure we are meeting that night.

Julie Lay

Opposite page: calligraphy by Benny McvAdams, brish calligraphy by Wing Leong

Life is a series of changes,
tiny ones, immense ones,
eager to take on some, others a struggle.
In learning to accept change
as a way of life,
we bring ourselves to a point
where we live each moment
for itself,
not knowing whether that moment
brings life or death,
not caring about what it brings,
moving beyond that,
just being there, ready for the experience,
anticipating – open – grateful.
CHANGES
©PHIL MORGAN – 6/26/87
DEDICATED TO THE WORK
OF LOUISE HAY
IN LOVING MEMORY
OF JIM CASE
Benny McAdams 1988

In Memory

By Julie Lay

As I sat inside the Forest Sanctuary where, just a year ago I'd witnessed his marriage, it was hard to think of saying farewell to Benny McAdams. A gifted calligrapher, artist, poet, musician, teacher and friend. A Renaissance man. A man of great sensitivity and humility. A good friend and a gifted teacher. A craft master in the old sense who took students under his wing and shared his philosophy, love of nature and artistic talent until they were ready to take their place besides him in the art community as equals.

But farewell it had to be. After struggling with the after-effects of chemotherapy, Benny passed away on June 14th at Our House hospice in Portland, Oregon. A widely attended memorial service was held the following week. I knew Benny was ill. Kcaj had called me to ask help in spreading the word and calling for cheer and support through the newsletter. But between putting the Summer Update to bed, final exams and packing, I wasn't able to visit Benny before I had to fly out to Connecticut. Mistake. I heard the sad news at Russ Eby's funeral when I got back. A friend thought I already knew. I learned that a second memorial service was to be July 31st at Breitenbush.

Breitenbush Retreat Center is very, very beautiful. Located in the Santiam mountains near Detroit Lake, Breitenbush is surrounded by tall, green conifers, clear sky, and divided by the murmuring mountain stream of the same name. Benny loved Breitenbush--there was always an extra sparkle to him when he told me of a intended trip. So, as we sat in a circle, talked and shared our favorite memories, cried and laughed and read aloud some of Benny's poetry, I started remembering Benny and how I had come to study with him.

I first met Benny about 8 years ago at a Menucha retreat where he was the guest instructor. I was involved in one of my overly complicated pieces of work so I didn't pay too much attention to the program. I remembered Benny, though; he was too nice to forget. Several years passed. I decided to begin drawing again. I'd worked with graphite pencils, pen & ink, and charcoal in college. I wanted something different so I signed up for a colored pencil class. Benny was the instructor.

Later that year, when the class was dropped by the school administration because of increased enrollment requirements, a group of us arranged with Benny to teach us privately. We meet at the home of one of the students and drew and drew and drew. At first it was regular lessons and then it evolved into a drop-in "whatever grabs ya" tutorial. Benny had a firm background in art having almost received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Texas at Austin. In his last year he switched his major to English. "I was very glad I did," he told me in a 1991 interview. "That way, art school didn't ruin my art. I learned a lot of technique and ways of doing my own research and both those things were very valuable." One of classes he attended in his first year at college was a lettering course taught by Gaddis Geeslin. Benny found the techniques taught by Gaddis extremely valuable, translating them into the

them into the medium of the Prisma colored pencil. Benny recalled that the class was mostly drawn letters, and declared that he was even then partial toward built-up letters.

Benny had left Texas in 1980 to study Italic in Portland with Jaki Svaren because he loved her "beautiful, elegant letterforms". Ever since he'd been an adult, all the techniques Benny had used teaching and working had been techniques that he had learned himself because of visions of certain effects he wanted to produce with the colored pencil--effects that no one he knew was producing. Benny had to "roll it over in my mind and think what would produce this technique." Benny learned his craft from the best of all teachers, experience. Although he worked in just about any medium, the colored pencil held a special place in his heart for its responsive and almost affectionate cooperation. "It's as if the artwork is working through me," he said. One of Benny's trademark techniques was the application of colored pencil on dark papers. He was fascinated with the luminous, jewel-like effect of the colors over black and how it adds a misty, ephemeral quality to the artwork. Unlike white paper whose pores show through the pencil strokes unless completely filled in, dark papers add a richness and depth to a composition, appearing as part of the drawing.

Benny was a firm believer in the sound construction of letterforms and in the value of constant practice. His everyday handwriting was fantastic. While it was only at the Breitenbush service that I actually read from his poetry journals (which Kcaj will have published through a trust currently being set up), years ago he had shown me a long narrative composition about the life of Gandhi that he was writing out in exquisite Italic. Even his notes and grocery lists were written in Italic. As a teacher he was a classic role model. He lived what he taught. There was never any fear in his classes. The student's confidence in themselves was very important to Benny. There was never a "disaster" (as we called them) that couldn't be fixed even if it meant a full can of workable matte fixative. As Jaki Svaren said when I talked to her a few days before writing this article, Benny was an extremely gentle man who never "stomped" on others feelings. Benny always asked our permission before touching or correcting any of our drawings. We always said "Go right ahead! I don't suppose you'd sign that corner, would you?" Benny'd just flash a look at us and shake his head, but you knew his eyes were twinkling.

Benny had a special ability to look at the qualities of light and tone and to translate them onto paper. Maggie Rogers another friend and student of his, recalls Benny saying "Light has the habit of wrapping around an object" and that " The farther away something is, the greater chance it has for reflecting light."

Thinking of light and the colored pencils he loved so much, it felt very "right" after the memorial service to walk down to the Breitenbush River to scatter Benny's ashes. We followed a colorful banner in the shape of a bird's wing, full of jewel tones--ruby red, emerald green, amethyst. We stood on the bridge for a while, the wind rustling through the leaves along the riverbank and tangling our hair, before Benny's companion Kcaj slowly poured the ashes into the breeze over the murmuring river. We stood there holding onto each other in silence watching the river flow past, watching the light shine on the leaves, the rocks, a flash of bird wing. Birds and deer and plants drink from the Breitenbush as it flows down out of the Santiam mountains and enters the North Santiam River which flows into the Willamette. Willamette into Columbia. Columbia River into the Pacific Ocean. Changing and yet still the same. So it is with Benny McAdams. He is gone--changed, transformed . . . whatever you want to call it. But a little bit of him remains here with us who loved him and studied with him. Everything I have ever done and will do, especially with colored pencil, has a bit of Benny in it. Last week I finished a new calligraphy piece incorporating a colored pencil drawing. I had to do it on my own and not rely on Benny to tell me how to do it That's O.K. Benny left me with many good lessons to mull over and translate into my own style of work. That is perhaps the best legacy anyone can give. And our best gift to him and his memory is to keep working and growing and, like apprentices in the old sense, to take our place besides him in the art community . Besides, I'm Irish--Maggie and I always joked that Benny was really a forest elf in disguise--Kcaj firmly believes that Benny's still with us. His harp has been playing, by itself . . .