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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTHA LOCHERT

A Life's Work

BY AYLAROSE GILBERT

40 YEARS OF ART AND MARRIAGE

Walking inside the home studio of Mirle Freel, Jr. and Judy O'Toole-Freel is like stepping into a world bursting with color and imagination. Colorful artwork adorns vibrantly painted walls, which serve as a unique backdrop, as if their art could not be confined to traditional square-shaped frames. The studio is filled with decades of collaboration, creativity and compassion.

They first met when Mirle was developing an art program for blind students at a school for the deaf and blind where Judy worked as a teacher. Their love sparked over a shared passion for learning, the arts and horses. The two have worked together over the course of more than 40 years of marriage to explore the dynamic relationship of the written word and visual art — Judy as an author and visual artist, and Mirle as a retired art professor, working artist and photographer. Judy says that over the years her husband became her mentor in art, and although she didn't have

as much formal training, he inspired her to pursue painting as well.

Mirle's work has been featured all over the country and Judy has published numerous articles and a book of poetry called "Looking for the Sunrise." The couple's most recent joint effort is a children's book titled "Aardvark, Aardvark, How Do You Do!" which Judy authored and Mirle illustrated. They received a 2008 Mini-Grant from the Tucson Pima Arts Council and presented the book and its original artwork at the 2nd annual Marana Youth Festival in April. The book outlines the design elements of art in simple, easy to understand terminology. Mirle says that design is the basis of everything — if you understand the elements, you can learn to appreciate any kind of art.

They both value the artistic process as a learning process and Judy describes being an artist as a "constant journey of discovery." Neither artist will be slowing down anytime soon. ■