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Link to original story: <https://www.uwosh.edu/today/128340/tales-from-titan-town-leif-larson-05-creates-immense-painting-of-uwo-has-home-at-reeve-union/>

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/SuXiWKVpMhc?si=tKDiDovQjRFH2e3H>

Tales from Titan Town: Leif Larson ’05 creates immense painting of UWO for Reeve Memorial Union

Written by Grace Lim, University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh

The University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh recently unveiled a new painting in Reeve Memorial Union, a sweeping 5-by-16-foot acrylic painting that captures the energy and spirit of campus life. Titled, A Portrait of UWO: Celebrating the Campus and Student Community from a Unique Perspective, the artwork was created by alumnus Leif Larson ’05, BFA, an Appleton native whose work has been exhibited across the country.

Larson’s painting, which was commissioned by the Steinhilber Art Gallery Foundation, places viewers above the campus, inviting them to experience UWO as if hovering like a bird over its buildings, walkways and gathering spaces. Its details, down to flowers outside Dempsey Hall and the Titan athletic fields, invite students and visitors alike to see the University with fresh eyes.

At the unveiling, Chancellor Manohar Singh praised Larson’s work as a true gift to the University and noted how meaningful it was that the artist behind it is a UW-Oshkosh graduate whose work’s shown in galleries, museums, universities and public buildings all over Wisconsin, and in galleries and public buildings in New York, Northern and Southern California, Illinois and Arkansas.

“That tells me two things: first, that you are passionate about what you do, and second, that your professors and UW-Oshkosh did a wonderful job nurturing that passion and giving you the skills to become such a brilliantly talented artist,” Singh said, adding, “We are very proud of you and thank you for working on this project for us here. You have made the whole campus come alive in one glance.”

Larson described the project as deeply personal.

“It’s an honor to be standing here, not just as an artist of this painting, but as an alumnus of this university,” he said. “This campus, this community, this land, it’s been part of my family’s story for over 50 years. It is sacred ground to us, as it is for so many who have attended UW-Oshkosh.”

His parents, Lance and Janis (Terrill) Larson, both graduated from UW-Oshkosh in 1974; Lance with a degree in history and Janis in elementary education.

Larson added, “This painting is a portrait of the campus. It’s a snapshot in time, a tribute to community, and a gift for everyone who has ever walked these grounds. It’s an aerial portrait made with heart, memory and intention.”

His public murals are a familiar part of the Oshkosh landscape. He has painted four around the city, as well as large works in Appleton and Waupaca, and his pieces are included in both public and private collections.

In this Q & A, Larson reflects on his journey from a Division I baseball player to a professional artist, the professors at UW-Oshkosh who pushed him to take art seriously, and what it means to return to campus with a painting that celebrates the Titan community for generations to come.

**When you were growing up, what did you imagine yourself becoming? Was college part of that picture?**

As a kid, I wanted to be a baseball player. I earned a Division I scholarship as a pitcher at Indiana State University, but after breaking my back twice, once in high school and again in college. I knew I needed to make a change. That’s when I turned to art, something I had loved since third grade.

By elementary school, my friend Jason and I would bring sketchbooks to the playground. We’d compare drawings, and soon a crowd of kids would gather around the swings to see what we made that day. I drew Ninja Turtles. That was when I realized art could stop people in their tracks, make them curious and even bring joy.

**What brought you to UW-Oshkosh?**

My parents had both gone to UWO, and after Indiana State, coming closer to home felt right. I had heard about the strength of the art program, and the baseball coach here had been interested in me as well. By January 2000, I was ready to commit fully to art, and UWO gave me that opportunity.

**Which classes or professors were most influential for you?**

All of them left an impact, but three in particular, my painting professors, Ron Weaver, Jeff Lipschitz and Li Hu.

Ron was pure energy. He lived and breathed painting and even the smallest comments stuck. Sometimes he’d just walk up to my canvas, glance at it, and say, “Sometimes the corners are very important.” Then he’d walk away, leaving me to figure it out. It was frustrating at the moment, but eventually I understood what he meant.

Jeff focused on storytelling. He wanted us to think about what we were really trying to say, to unpack our own intentions and make sure the work carried a narrative. He asked probing questions like, “Is this really what you were trying to do?”

Li was all about technical skill. He drilled us on anatomy, proportions, the way bones and muscles interact in space. He taught us to see the human body structurally, to understand how it moves, so we could represent it accurately.

Each of them carried themselves with passion and seriousness, and that energy was contagious. They helped me see that art wasn’t just a pastime. It was profound; it shaped culture, history and humanity.

**You’ve exhibited across the U.S. and created murals in Wisconsin communities. How did UWO prepare you for that kind of career?**

The work ethic I developed here is still with me. Ron Weaver, in particular, told me once: “You’re very talented, but you have to work at it. Don’t be arrogant. Learn how to be better at you.” That hit me hard, and I’ve carried it ever since.

**Public art is such a big part of your career. Why is it important to you?**

Public art is about connection. When I first started, Oshkosh didn’t have much public art, and I worked behind the scenes to help normalize it. Once I created my first mural, I saw how powerful it could be. People stop, take photos, smile, and see their community in a new way.

**How did this UWO painting project come about?**

When I was contacted last August and commissioned to create a painting for this space, I knew instantly this wasn’t just a commission, it was a calling. This was my chance to give something back to a place that helped shape who I am.

Not long after, I traveled to Europe and visited the Louvre. Seeing some of the greatest works of art ever created filled me with energy. When I came back, I dove into this piece. It took two months to draw the composition—using charcoal, erasing and redrawing until it felt right—and then five months of painting. I used Google Earth for perspective, but I also walked campus, taking in small details like flower beds and walkways that I wanted to include. Every brushstroke carried a memory, whether mine as a student, my parents from the 1970s, or those of students walking on campus today.

In the summer, I worked in my garage studio at home, which I’ve built up over 15 years. Once the weather turned, I moved the work downtown to my studio above New Moon. In the winter, I’d walk in, turn on the heater, and wait 30 minutes for the room to warm up. I’d sit in my rocking chair, staring at the mural in silence. I often found myself zoning out on stories of the past that I’d experienced on the campus, and then I’d start working.

**Did you put yourself in the painting?**  
Yes, I worked in a small nod to myself in the Arts and Communication building, where I spent so much time as a student. It’s a little tip of the cap to that part of my journey. I try to keep things like that minimal, because I want the focus to be on the University and the student community.

**What do you hope students and visitors experience when they stand in front of it?**

When you stand about five feet away, you start to lose your peripherals, and you just see the painting. You feel like a bird hovering over the community, over the campus and all the details. For me, the painting is a reminder that you’re part of something bigger than yourself. I felt it while working on it, and people have told me they feel it when standing in front of it. There’s a humility in that moment, seeing all the energy of the University, then zooming in on one small figure walking across campus, then zooming back out again to realize they are part of something larger.

It is my hope that when people walk past it, whether they’re on their way to class, lunch, a meeting or a reunion, they don’t just see the campus, they feel it. Students, alumni, faculty and visitors will look at it and say: that’s where I had my first class, that’s where I met my best friend, that’s where I realized what I wanted to do with my life.

**What does it mean to you personally to have your work permanently displayed at UWO?**

Unbelievable gratitude, more than anything. I was honored right from the start. I’ve worked very hard over the years, and I felt ready for this opportunity. At the same time, I don’t know if I’ve fully processed it yet; that might take years, with more layers to come. But I do feel like I was in the right place at the right time, and it’s humbling to know the piece will be part of the UW-Oshkosh’s story.