

ME AND CHARLES MCGEE

Written By
Joe Beyer



Executive Director of the *Michigan Legacy Art Park* discovers the works of an accomplished Detroit artist.

“We’re thinking about Charles McGee,” the voice proclaimed from across the conference table at the Dennon Museum Center in Traverse City. I jotted it down in my notepad quickly, searching my memory for any hint of recall – nothing.

I would later learn that just minutes earlier, I’d passed under one of his sculptures in the lobby garden without even knowing it.

“He’s an icon, a teacher, and probably the most unique artist working in Michigan today. The big challenge will be it might be a tough trip for him to make it up here. He’s 94 years old.” Now I was really intrigued.

What kind of dedicated maniac could endure the art world for that long and still be creating at a time when most people would be focusing on their shuffleboard scores?

I was sheepishly out of my element, sitting through my very first Board of Directors meeting as the new Executive Director of Michigan Legacy Art Park, an outdoor sculpture experience in Benzie County created in 1995. I had accepted just a week before, and was fast realizing how much I had to learn. I've worked in the arts my whole career, the vast majority of it supporting filmmakers and moving-image storytellers in the land they called Hollywood, and up in the mountains of Park City, Utah at the Sundance Film Festival.

What had I gotten myself into? I reassured myself that my lifelong love of creativity, and my strange obsession with the art world over the last few years had all, somehow, led me to this place and this job. Now it was time to own it.

I was in the deep end for sure, but I still knew how to swim. "Can I ask a question? If we feel passionate about honoring this man, let's go for it. If he can make it up for the award ceremony, great. If he can't, I feel confident we can find a way to bring his spirit and inspiration into the room. I'm wondering if anyone would object to me reaching out and exploring this. He sounds like a fantastic honoree and I'll jump into this and report back."

I left the meeting with a catalogue of McGee's work under my arm and a New Yorker article. I had my homework and a major gift from the skilled nominating committee that had chosen him - I was thrilled and excited.

I knew I needed help. I wasn't sure how best to reach this man or how to convince him to let us laud him - I had already heard he was famously humble, shy of attention, and not driven by ego. He may not be eager to receive what might be yet another award.

Fortunately, my board gave me the breakthrough I needed - it just so happened that one of our longest supporters and a founding member of the Art Park was also one of Charles McGee's best friends. We had the bridge we were looking for.



"Hi, this is Joe Beyer at Michigan Legacy Art Park, we haven't met yet but I was hoping we could chat about something." And then we did, easily and comfortably. Marilyn Wheaton is known statewide as a fierce and passionate supporter of the arts, and she was finishing up a brilliant 12-year career as Executive Director of the Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum in Saginaw.

She immediately lit up when the conversation turned to McGee. "Joe, this is a wonderful idea. I will help you. I can't think of anyone more worthy of being recognized in this way."

Letters and packages were mailed, a plan for an ambush on McGee in his home was staked out, and I waited for the phone call that was now weeks in the making. When it came, I was on the edge of my seat.



"So I spoke to Charles and he was truly touched." I braced for the letdown. "He doesn't think he can come up, it's so hard right now for him physically, but he's accepted if you still want to move forward."

Marilyn and I plotted further – perhaps one of his daughters could attend? Possible. Could we beam him in by live feed? Not likely. At age 94 he's not a Luddite, but not super comfortable with technology either. And there are good days and bad and it's hard to predict which type it will be. Maybe a video tribute? Yes, that's the best idea. We put it in motion. It had to be at his home, to make it easy, and we'd hope for the best.

Marilyn would be there, to make it comfortable. I worked behind the scenes with a brilliant young producer, Jarrett Begick, to make it happen, explaining at every turn it would be delicate – and we wouldn't know what we'd get. After the shoot, I got the footage and was mesmerized by McGee's life and his interview. He was still so sharp and connected and still yearning to express himself.

More good news came in, McGee's daughter Lyndsay McGee would come up to accept the Legacy Award on behalf of her father.



“Well, what do you want to do now?” I asked my girlfriend Beth in frustration. Not with her, but with the weather and the airlines and the unpredictable nature of traveling. Our weekend getaway to visit Washington D.C. had just been cancelled as we were literally heading out the door to the airport.

We were both equally bummed. “We could always go downstate to Detroit? You haven’t been since you were a kid. Lots to see and do.”

“We could go see McGee’s works too, I really want to do that.” Opportunistic planning from the car ensued and hours later we were checking into The Siren Hotel in downtown (a hip boutique affair just a pop-fly away from the Tigers Stadium and the heart of the The Belt Alley arts scene). Walking out onto the city streets, I pulled up my notes on where to find McGee’s works.



“No way, it’s right around the corner!” Unity is the largest of McGee’s works, completed when he was a remarkable 92-years old. Standing eleven stories tall and blasting out high-contrast pay-attention-to-me graphics as high as the eye could see. We chose Downtown Louie’s bar right around the corner on West Grand River Avenue to shelter in place and admire the audacity of it. One hundred and eighteen feet high by fifty feet wide. It screams. I was smitten and sure I wouldn’t be the last person to feel what I felt.

We ventured forward to the Detroit Institute of Arts, a major space that doesn’t get the attention it deserves. We ventured through the galleries, one by one, stunned by the creativity of humanity at every turn. This is what artists do – a translation of something intangible. Unknown until you feel it, and then it’s as true as water and air. We were in that zone where every choice, every brushstroke, every color, every idea was speaking out at us through time and space. It was euphoric; the singularity of recognizing how amazing we humans can be when we choose to be.



We rounded the corner and saw it for the first time, McGee's piece *Noah's Ark Genesis* takes up almost the entire wall in the African American wing of the gallery. It hits you in the gut – maybe it's the eyes of the figures staring back at you with bright white pupils. Or the energy of the brushstrokes that seem almost alive, as if they were completed only seconds before you see them. Or the bizarre 3D details, like the bug embedded in the paint that you can only see if you make the pilgrimage to get up close. They say once you know McGee's work, you'll recognize it instantly, and I was beginning to understand.

We walked to the next wing and there he was again – something special and glorious when we saw *Spectral Rhythms* on the wall, a color exercise or dream in painted form, it mattered not. We simply admired it.

"Man, I'm really excited," I said in recognition of the honor I felt that we would get this chance in a few months to salute this man I still had not met. I felt something so strongly through him, by him – these artworks were the result of something so intentional. What had he been watching and seeing and feeling that made this come out of him?

We were connecting, Charles and I, through his art.



It only deepened the following days when we explored more of what he was leaving behind for us to follow. We walked up to the Charles M. Wright museum entrance and stood under it – his legacy and his statement – a sculpture called simply *United We Stand*. It hovers and beckons you to walk near it, underneath it, with it. It provokes you to see yourself within it if you're ready. You are a part of this lineage and history. Not the physical you, but the you that lives within the tiny spark and capsule of your time. Are you the white or the black figure, or are you both? I think Charles would say the latter.



We ventured on foot for the nine block trip to the next piece, a recent restoration of the *Untitled* 1974 geometric mural he'd created in his relative youth. The vivid, minimalist kaleidoscope of translucent shapes had been painted over, abandoned, forgotten. Then restored, fixed, and celebrated again – a wayfaring stranger come back to life. Charles was as surprised as anyone at the resurrection. It came at a price, \$45,000 according to the news reports. But wow, what the hell, it was worth it. Even though the brick façade now sported cutouts for windows overlooking a parking lot, it still seemed to fit here. Like it had been created not just for the first time, but also for the last time. It would remain I was sure, because it was meant to. This was my favorite piece.

The ride home was filled with excitement and ideas for the event. We had connected face-to-face, soul-to-soul, and heart-to-heart with McGee and none of it was expected or disappointing. It was better and deeper than I imagined. I was now on a mission to make sure we saluted him in the most honorable way possible.

"Is this Charles?" "Yes." "This is Joe Beyer from the Michigan Legacy Art Park, I was hoping you might have a couple minutes?" He did. The voice was both familiar and exotic at the same time, I knew more about him than he would ever know about me and I realized at that moment that I had been thinking about him every single day for over six-months – a strange feeling upon finally making the personal connection I had been waiting for.

"Joe, I wanna tell you – I'm really honored by this award, thank you." "Well, I didn't do anything, Charles – you did!" "Togetherness is what I've tried to do in everything, you know? We need it so badly right now too. Thank you for the honor of it."

The purpose of my call was simple, I need McGee's blessing for an idea we'd hatched to create an Artist Residency in his name, designed to bring creators from the greater Detroit area Up North to experience the Art Park and use the inspiration to make something, anything, that struck them – all in his name. I was desperately hoping he'd agree to it, and he did. I was reminded of the sage advice, "The road to success and the road to failure are almost exactly the same." It could have gone either way, but thankfully, he was not only encouraging but he was enthusiastic. I had the wind in my sails I needed and the new Charles McGee Art Fund was officially created on that call.

(Just two weeks later we would raise almost \$24,000 in less than 3 minutes to kickstart the project, so moved was the audience by watching our tribute video to Charles.)

The day before our big event had all the chaos and last-minute crazy that comes with any production. I was worried about everything but the call that eventually came in. It was from Marilyn and she sounded genuinely upset, "Charles isn't well." I stopped cold. "He's had a really tough day, they are sending the doctor over and I'm not sure Lyndsay will make it up for the ceremony."



I had braced for this call, always knowing something like this might be possible. My absolute first and only thought was how inconsequential our event really was in the scheme of this. "Listen, this is important, our ceremony is nothing – we'll be fine. Truly. Lyndsay should know we are the very last thing she should be concerned about, can you relay that for us?" She would and we agreed to talk again later that day.

I thought of the man on the end of the phone line I'd only known by voice and my heart ached, wishing only that he would be okay. We all waited and hoped for the best.

Lyndsay and Marilyn arrived together just an hour before our event started, both driving separately and getting out of Detroit late. But they made it. I felt slightly nervous meeting her, knowing what she had sacrificed to be with us that night, but there she was standing in front of me, so I offered a hug and welcomed her as best I could.

It's hard to imagine what you'd feel like leaving your father on the edge of a crisis, driving four hours away, only to listen and absorb strangers lauding him and then knowing you'd have to head back home in the morning to see him again - carrying only an ephemeral memory of the goodwill in your heart to share with him, but that's exactly what she did - with stoicism and grace and generosity.

She was on a weird and unpredictable journey - suddenly and unexpectedly the spokesperson for her father, traveling here and there to accept accolades that must make her both enormously proud and enormously sad at the same time as her father was not able to accept them anymore on his own.

We all share one side of this fate, the inevitability of nature claiming us. But few of us will know the other, which is the surprise and satisfaction of knowing what we leave behind will be genuinely appreciated by generations of people we'll never even know.

When the event concluded, Lyndsay was smiling and holding the award. I walked up and thanked her again for being here, knowing it was a tough couple of days. We were all so grateful. Both she and Marilyn had shared heartfelt and moving stories about Charles and his ideas, his life from a farm without electricity to the streets of Detroit when he was just 10 years old, and how it all made him the unique artist he is. How he created galleries for other African American artists just so their work would be seen. How he saw his work as a tool for building communities up and righting our failures as a society.



The threads that connected me this past year with Charles were bare, and stringy - not clean and organized. Before joining the Art Park, I didn't know his remarkable work or his inspiring and long human story.

I've never been able to truly believe that Art itself could or would change the world, but I've always firmly believed it was part of the solution. It has an essential part to play. The tiny connection I made to Charles only secured that feeling.

His belief and expressions of *togetherness* were all the proof I needed. //

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