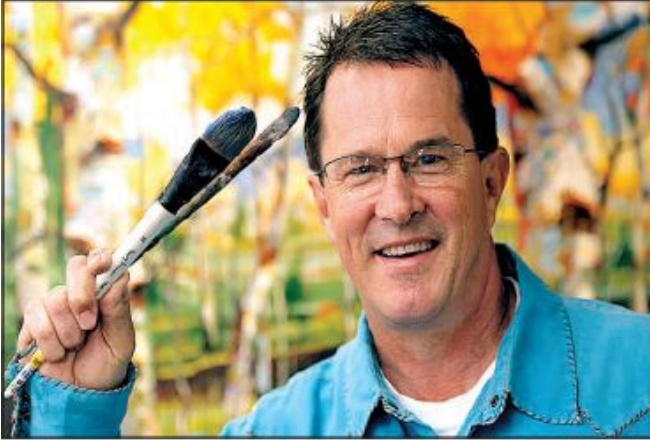


Artist waves flag to help children

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Little Rock-based artist Pat Matthews is donating his time — and an Arkansas flag painting, which he will finish and see auctioned — at the 19th Annual Arkansas Children's Award Dinner benefiting Arkansas Sheriffs' Youth Ranches on Thursday). This year's honoree is Gov. Mike Beebe, who has served as master of ceremonies for the event for the last 18 years.

Little Rock-based impressionist artist Pat Matthews, noted for his American and Arkansas flags and landscapes, is putting brush to canvas in support of Arkansas Sheriffs' Youth Ranches. The former architect will be completing one of his coveted state flag paintings this week during the organization's fundraising event in Little Rock.

"People ask me all the time to paint and give to auctions," Matthews says. "But I only do the things that are near and dear to my heart — like helping kids."

The 19th Annual Arkansas Children's Award Dinner will be held Thursday at Embassy Suites in Little Rock. This year's honoree, Gov. Mike Beebe, is being recognized for his 32 years of public service in Arkansas, and for his many years supporting the ranches, having served as master of ceremonies for the dinner for the past 18 years.

The fundraiser begins at 6 p.m. with an hour-long, Arkansas-themed silent auction and reception, followed by a dinner and program at 7 in the Ambassador Ballroom. Radio show host David Bazzel of KABZ-FM, 103.7 The Buzz, will take Beebe's place at the microphone.

Matthews will paint one of his Arkansas flags during the reception; then it will be auctioned during the program. A similar painting by Matthews hangs in Beebe's office at the Governor's Mansion.

"He was the first one to commission me to do an Arkansas flag painting," Matthews says of Beebe. "He made 500 prints of it and we both signed them. He's given them to charities wanting to auction them, and some have sold for \$1,000 each."

Matthews, who also donated a print of his Arkansas Razorback to the silent auction, recalls when he painted his first American flag, one of which now hangs in every state.



"It was the night of 9/11," artist Pat Matthews of Little Rock recalls of his first painting of an American flag. "I didn't have a blank canvas so I painted over an existing painting which gave it a layered effect." Matthews will finish creating and auction off a painting of the Arkansas flag Thursday at the 19th annual Arkansas Children's Award Dinner benefiting Arkansas Sheriffs' Youth Ranches at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Little Rock.

"It was the night of 9/11," he says. "I didn't have a blank canvas so I painted over an existing painting, which gave it a layered effect." Matthews later flew to New York to present the painting to Ladder Company No. 54, which lost 15 members in the terrorist attack. He gave signed prints to the families of the 343 city firefighters who died.

Matthews, who also paints landscapes of scenes in Arkansas, Colorado and other locales, says he gets a lot of commissions from clients in Arkansas and around the nation.

"Some people like my Aspen paintings, but everybody loves the flag," he says.

From a young age, Matthews says, he wanted to be a painter, but got a degree in architecture from the University of Arizona, where he won a design award for his work.

"I didn't want to be a starving artist," he explains of his degree choice.

Back home in Little Rock, he made a deal with an artist who needed someone to design his house. He designed the house, and the owner, Barry Thomas, taught him how to paint.

"For a while I did architecture during the day and painted at night. But then I talked to a life coach, told her I really wanted to paint, and she encouraged me to pursue it full time. So I quit the six architecture jobs I was working on at the time."

Matthews' first show in Little Rock, held in June 2001 at Local Color Gallery, was a success.

"I had 48 paintings in it and sold all 48 in one night," recalls the artist, who still shows his work at the gallery. He also has works in galleries in Santa Fe, N.M.; Beaver Creek, Colo.; and Charleston, S.C.

Matthews has painted in France, Italy and Spain. Stateside, one of his favorite haunts is along the West Coast.

"I have a four-wheeler with a rack on the back of it and go paint in the mountains," he says of his work in Arkansas. "And you don't have to go far; Pinnacle Mountain or Petit Jean Mountain."

Arkansas Sheriffs' Youth Ranches houses about 45 young people in group foster homes at three rural locations — one in Amity on Lake DeGray; one in Batesville; and the third in the Alma/Mulberry area, says Matt Cleveland, the private, nonprofit organization's chief development officer. Its capacity is 75 children.

"We currently have eight sibling groups; it's hard to place sibling groups in foster homes," Cleveland says.

About 90 percent of the organization's funding comes from private donations.

Tickets to the dinner are \$200. For more information or to buy tickets by phone, call Cleveland at (501) 940-3440. Tickets can also be bought online via brownpapertickets.com.

This year's event marks the first time silent and live auctions will be a part of the evening. The Arkansas-themed auction will include a Hot Springs racing getaway, a guided duck hunt in Stuttgart, art and jewelry.

Matthews, who lives in Little Rock with wife, Tracee Gentry Matthews, who is also an artist, and 14-year-old daughter Griffyn, explains why he has picked up the paintbrush to help at the fundraiser.

"I do feel you get what you give, and I've been very blessed," he says. "I've been able to make a living doing this for 13 years now."