

# Celebratory painting

## is a tribute to a place and a father



By Scott Latta '15

*At right, a photo by family friend Yolanda Valdes-Rementeria captures a moment between painters Erik Sandgren and his late father, OSU artist and teacher Nelson Sandgren. Above, the younger Sandgren's "Avenue of Elms," commissioned by the OSU Foundation to recognize the leadership of President Ed Ray during the \$1.14 billion Campaign for OSU, hangs near the elevators on the top floor of Kerr Administration Building.*

Last spring, beneath a line of elms on the lower OSU campus, a man sat bending time.

Forward motion stopped. The world before him stilled, its people frozen in their poses. The sun cast impossible shadows, at once in the east and the west. It wasn't magic — it was manipulation, which of course is a form of magic, though one that becomes reasonable when explained by someone who can do it.

"You can compress space in paintings," Erik Sandgren said. "You can layer time. There are photographers who can do that, but it's the glory of painting: to bring far things to the surface."

For a month last May, Sandgren fixed himself on the lower OSU campus, working daily beneath the trees to complete what would later become "Avenue of Elms," a 67-by-40-inch acrylic painting commissioned by the OSU Foundation as a gift to the university's art collection to recognize the leadership of President Ed Ray during the \$1.14 billion Campaign for OSU.

For Sandgren, an accomplished Pacific Northwest painter and faculty member at Washington's Grays Harbor College, the job was more than a commission: it was a chance to face off against his father, renowned OSU art professor Nelson Sandgren, who taught at Oregon State from 1948 to 1986 and died in 2006.

It's hard to walk a hallway in Corvallis today without seeing a Nelson Sandgren painting — they line walls from the CH2M HILL Alumni Center to the Corvallis Public Library. Nelson joined the fledgling OSU art department after World War II, interviewing in his shirtsleeves and "just thankful to be alive," in Erik's words.

It was a different campus then, with fewer colleges, but it was a fantastic time and place to be an artist. As the hub of the Corvallis Belle Époque, the Sandgren home was the place to be seen — a young Erik came of age dodging priggish dinner party arguments among the university's foremost authors, linguists, artists and scientists.

Although Bernard Malamud and Gordon Gilkey no longer square off in its dining room, the house today is no less an artistic presence. Every day, after packing up his supplies on campus, Erik continued his work there, blending the OSU of the past with the one being built today, in his father's old studio.

"I walked around campus and saw the new buildings, and I saw my father's paintings," Sandgren said. "In my mind, I just couldn't escape from Benton Hall. I thought, 'Well, if he painted that, I want to paint that, too.'"

By tucking Benton Hall behind the towering trees, "Avenue of Elms" recalls the university's origins as a land grant institution. But it also spotlights campus diversity, and the range of opportunities available to today's students.

It's a tribute to the affection Sandgren holds for the place he grew up, but it's also a tribute to the man who nurtured it, tucked away in little touches only he would know.

"My father's paintings feature significant aspects of campus life," Sandgren said. "I was delighted by the opportunity as a painter to go head-to-head with them and have my work included with my father's in the OSU context."

The painting now hangs across from the elevators on the sixth floor of Kerr Administration Building, the university's executive suite. Ed Ray and Sabah Randhawa, provost and executive vice

president, each received a print.

"My wife Beth was a country girl and I grew up with bricks and concrete and asphalt and always longed for mountains, trees and pastures," Ray said.

"So the painting is perfect. I will always treasure it. The campaign and all of our work on behalf of this wonderful university community is truly a team effort and a joy for me. Working with the foundation staff, our university colleagues and our wonderful friends is gift enough." 🍌

