



Darren Etlinger's oil on canvas painting sitting on the lawn in front of St. Joseph High School's O'Connor Hall.

STJ: Oak Lane @ O'Connor Hall

The Class of 1991 Use Classmate's Painting to Honor Chris Brown

Members of the St. Joseph High School Class of 1991 recently came together in support of their alma mater and in honor of two of their classmates. The reunion was not a traditional one that involved committee work and traditional reunion-style events; it was a reunion of friends to support two of their own . . . from the heart.

It all began when Darren Etlinger '91, who owns d.p.Etlinger Fine Art in Sugar Land, Texas, had the idea to create a painting to donate to the 25th annual STJ Jubilee in April 2023. His hope was that the painting would provide support to STJ, but also give exposure of his business in his hometown of Victoria.

His classmates appreciated his efforts

and wanted to support him. Class of '91 graduates including Chris Bludau, Jess Howard, Carlos Chapa, Brady Anders and Trey Sparkman all chimed in and expressed interest in supporting their classmate and getting the word out about the painting. After discussions of who would be interested in bidding, the group opted to increase their buying power



Several members of the Class of 1991 attended the dedication of the Darren Etlinger painting that now hangs in the lobby at St. Joseph High School. Pictured are (from left) Joe Ybarra, Chris Bludau, Richard Alexander, James Brown, Jody Brown, Darren Etlinger, Trey Sparkman, Fr. Bryan Heyer, Brady Anders, Tom Preiss and Jess Howard.



The family of the late Chris Brown '91 was on hand for the dedication of "STJ: The Oaks @ O'Connor Hall," a painting created by Darren Etlinger. Pictured are (from left): Richard Alexander '91, Mary Alexander, Katy Brown, Scott Brown '93, Jody Brown, James Brown, Darren Etlinger '91, Kevin Brown '97, Kenny Brown '98 and James Brown.

and join together to buy the painting. At the suggestion of Sparkman, they would bid and hopefully purchase the artwork in memory of Chris Brown '91, another classmate who was tragically lost in a workplace accident in 1995.

They reached out to their classmates through social media and word of mouth. Their efforts were a success. Collectively, the Class of 1991 purchased "STJ: Oak Lane @ O'Connor Hall," an oil on canvas painting created by Etlinger. Their winning bid was \$11,750, making the painting the highest selling item in the 25th annual Jubilee Auction and providing support for the general operations of St. Joseph High School.

"This gift is significant to STJ. The Class of 1991 should be commended for their generosity and consideration in supporting our school," said Megan

Schott, STJ principal. "But more importantly, they are admired for their efforts to support the work of a fellow classmate in Darren Etlinger, and doing so in memory of another classmate, Chris Brown. This is truly an example of Flyers living out the values we work to teach to all of our students."

Once the painting was purchased, members of the Class of 1991 announced it would be donated to St. Joseph High School where they would like it to hang in memory of Brown.

Chris Brown was a beloved classmate. His parents Jody and James Brown have four sons, all of which graduated from STJ. Chris was the oldest and was followed at STJ by three brothers – Scott Brown '93, Kevin Brown '97 and Kenny Brown '98. When Chris passed away, he and his wife Mary had a five-month-old

daughter, Katy Brown '13 who is also a graduate of STJ and has a degree in allied health from Texas A&M University. The family's roots run deep at STJ and Chris' mom Jody is still a beloved volunteer and substitute teacher at the school.

The group of classmates knew the tribute to Chris would be meaningful to his family, and Trey Sparkman was the one charged with letting the Brown family know.

"Trey showed up at our house one evening after the auction," said Jody Brown. "I couldn't imagine what he had come for, and was relieved when his voice seemed jovial."

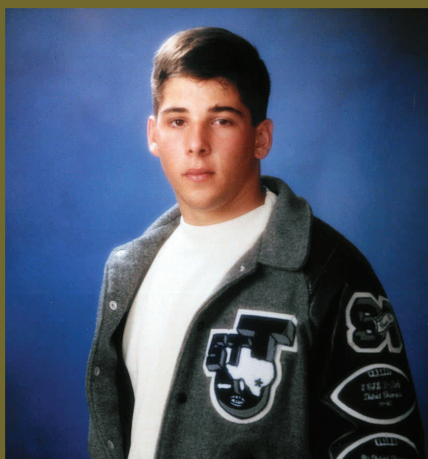
"Trey explained to me and James that the class had gone together and bought this painting that Darren Etlinger had donated to be sold in the Jubilee Auction," she said. "They had bought it in memory of Chris and were donating it back to the school where it would hang in his memory."

"James and I cried and were very touched by the gesture of Chris' classmates. This class is just amazing," she said. "They were amazing when Chris passed away, and they are still amazing 28 years later. They have never left us. They still call and check on us. I go to the cemetery and there are little things that have been left by them. They are family."

"This is truly an example of Flyers living out the values we work to teach all our students.."

MEGAN SCHOTT

The Brown family, Etlinger and several members of the Class of 1991 came together for an official unveiling and dedication of the painting at St. Joseph High School on June 10, 2023. The piece of art hangs in the lobby of the STJ Administration Building with a brass plate acknowledging the artist, the Class of 1991 and Chris Brown.



Chris Brown '91

The Heart of the Artist

What Darren Etlinger originally meant to be an opportunity to raise money for St. Joseph High School and to promote his fine art business, instead reconnected his present to his past and filled voids in his history that he would have never imagined.

In May 2022, Etlinger reached out to STJ English teacher Gretchen Boyle '82 asking her thoughts on the perfect setting for a painting that he could donate to be sold at the St. Joseph Jubilee Auction the following year.

"After creating a painting to raise money for a friend in need, I concluded that contributing a painting to STJ might be another option to do good while gaining some exposure within my hometown market. I asked Mrs. Boyle her thoughts, noting that back in our day we had 'the Lane' on the campus of the school," he said. "I asked what would be the modern day equivalent of 'the Lane,' today?" She told me the oak trees on the O'Connor Hall side of campus."

In August 2022 when Etlinger and his daughters were in Victoria to visit his mom they stopped by to check out the oak trees and took a multitude of photos of the campus. After sorting through them he forwarded several to Boyle to glean her advice on which image best embodied present day STJ.

Boyle's reply included reference to a particular photo and the response, "Hi Darren. I got some feedback, and we think this photo is the most magnificent and just waiting to be painted!"

It was then that his work began.

Etlinger printed full-scale copies of the image, cut out and traced specific images onto his canvas, and then painted the canvas from sky to grass, building to tree.

Painting the piece was nostalgic for him, and also a reminder St. Joseph High School is a constant.

"While studying at the University of Houston-Victoria in the late 90s, I rented a garage apartment in the area near STJ," Etlinger said. "I would go for a run around the campus and I'd stop by occasionally to see the faculty. But I moved to Houston in 1998 and hadn't had much involvement with the school since. My whole world has changed since then – wife, two kids, a house in Sugar Land – as well as my perspective, but the campus has remained constant."

"These majestic oaks are the embodiment of our collective storyline -- a tale of what once was and is yet to come ..."

DARREN ETLINGER

"The campus, our campus, these trees – with the same drooping branches I walked amongst 35 years ago – the identity of this institution resides, lives, amongst these peculiar shadows and within the circular growth-rings of these parental sentinels," he said. "I see them as the record keepers of the past 85 years."

"These majestic oaks are the embodiment of our collective storyline – a tale of what once was and what is yet to come; like our school, steadfast through changing weather and the vagaries of cultural norms – they, and we, are still here," he said. "Their grandeur above is a testament to what we all already know, below: that their roots – our roots – run deep."

It's because of those deep roots that the reunion of classmates and friends

that ensued was so meaningful for Etlinger. The purchase of the painting by his graduating Class of 1991, being done so in memory of his childhood friend Chris Brown, reminded him of the constants in life.

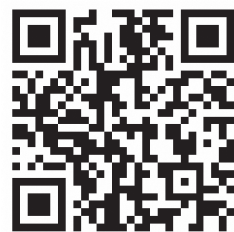
"I am simply grateful to have this opportunity to share this moment with my class and the Browns – to commemorate a friend and classmate lost too soon, but someone with whom I shared many fond moments and memories – so many decades ago," Etlinger said.

"When I began envisioning the outcome for this endeavor in the spring of 2022, I had hoped and expected members of my graduating class would play a role in helping me promote my offering. I was counting on it," he said. "To have events conspire as they did, with my class coming together – by suggestion and design of one of our own – and at a price that dwarfed most other bids that day – was validation and support over 30 years in the making. For that, I am thankful." ■

Prints and Merchandise Available for Purchase

Prints of "STJ: Oak Lane @ O'Connor Hall" by Darren Etlinger, and other merchandise with the image of O'Connor Hall can be purchased.

A portion of the proceeds from the sales will be donated to St. Joseph High School.



Scan to view available merchandise

