

Jim White

The Creative Process

When Jim White was in seventh grade, he decided to enter a piece of his own artwork into *National Scholastic Magazine's* poster contest. He'd always been an avid doodler in class, taking after his artistic father, and decided to submit a poster of his own for the simple, sheer joy of the creative process. "I drew two cartoon chipmunks pushing a walnut uphill to the bottom of a tree, and at the top, I wrote 'Help Nature Conserve'," Jim smiles, recalling what might best be termed his first masterpiece. "I ended up winning in my category, and the prize was \$100, which was a lot of money in the mid 1940's. That's when it dawned on me that I was given a gift by the Creator that few are fortunate enough to receive, and that I could actually make a career out of my art. It was what I really wanted to do."

From that moment on, art became his life. His father had been an artist, doing animation for Disney and Columbia studios, and while he had found success in his career as Chief of Design and Graphics at a major federal government department, he understood the struggles that came with committing to the profession. Despite his reservations for his son, however, he supported Jim completely, and Jim was able to draw upon their combined knowledge and network to become a successful commercial artist and businessman. Now the cofounder and retired president of White+Partners, the largest and most successful independently-owned advertising agency in the Washington D.C. area, he found that the creative process doesn't only apply to art—it applies to life.

The company was launched in 1964 as Nolan, Duffy & White, named for Jim and his two founding partners. The three had met working at Creative Arts Studio, a large commercial art company, and broke off to create their own design team, working primarily in commercial art and creating brochures, pamphlets, and other

marketing tools for a wide range of local businesses and government agencies. After the first seven years of running the gamut in creative trade, they found themselves the top rated design studio in the DC area, though they were a team of only eight employees. Despite their success, however, they found it nearly impossible to grow beyond the status quo they had reached.

Around this time, large throngs of consulting companies were coming to Washington to work for the government. Jim's firm began doing graphic design and advertisements for that burgeoning industry until, in 1971, they were approached by one such company that hoped to acquire them. The company had a weak art department and was looking to upgrade by bringing on the small yet talented design team, and while Nolan, Duffy, & White was quite successful without outside help, they recognized the merger was their best chance of surpassing their current limits. Thus, Jim and one

other partner decided to buy out their third owner and move forward with the merger, seeing the opportunity for growth and networking with the company's large clientele.

Jim and his partner spent four years with the professional services company, during which he learned invaluable lessons in business. "It was like going to graduate school," he recalls. "I was suddenly responsible for the financial well being of the entire art division, so I had to start learning how to take the creative process a step further and actually make it profitable." It was a life changing experience for Jim in that it allowed him to see his profession from the numbers side, which had always been foreign to him. "One of the things that can happen to creative people in trying to run a business is that they try to run it strictly from the creative side," says Jim. "When that happens, you forget to make the money that keeps it going as a



business, so there are a lot of creative businesses that just go under because they can't manage." After the four years, however, the company ran into trouble and was, itself, acquired, prompting Jim to realize he was ready to break away and do his own thing again. With that, in 1975, he bought back his company with the equity he had acquired and renamed his operation E. James White Marketing Communications, later to become White+Partners.

Jim was born in Tennessee to his mother, who was a housewife, and his father, who worked for a printing company as an artist. Shortly after Jim's birth, his father decided to move the family to California to pursue work in the motion picture industry. He accepted a position as an animator for Disney, but when he discovered the job was an unpaid internship, he instead took a position with Columbia Pictures. He was involved in short subject films as an animator and background artist, and had a hand in the cartoon "Felix the Cat." Unfortunately, when World War II broke out, Hitler banned all Hollywood productions throughout Europe, which caused the film industry to suffer a severe recession that cost Jim's father his job. Luckily, Jim's grandfather was a career marine stationed in D.C., so the family moved to Washington, where his father found work as an artist for the federal government.

From an early age, Jim demonstrated a passion and proficiency not only for art, but also for making sales. He went door to door through his neighborhood selling whatever he could, from homemade nick-knacks, to ivy he unknowingly uprooted from a churchyard, to his floor waxing capabilities. "I sold as much as I could, and those poor folks in the neighborhood bought it from me," he laughs. Jim's family was extremely loving and supportive, which set the groundwork for an unshakable sense of self-confidence and worth. "I wasn't afraid to take risks and try new things," he says. "I credit a lot of that to my family, and perhaps some as well to my neighbors supporting whatever I was selling. No one ever beat me down."

Throughout high school, Jim's claim to fame was his ability to draw anything, and to draw it well. After graduation, he decided to attend art school in order to fine-tune his skills. "I had a professor in college who was a major influence," Jim recalls. "He was very demanding and an accomplished commercial artist, and I had to work

harder in his class to get good grades than anywhere else. Interestingly enough, he was a businessman as well, not just an academic. That gave him a more robust perspective on life that really contributed to my growth."

During his college years, Jim spent his summers working as a paid intern at Create Arts Studio, the largest art studio in Washington, grabbing sandwiches for artists on board and delivering packages to clients. Occasionally, they allowed him to do drawings, and after his second year of college, they offered him a job. "The man who owned the business at the time was very successful and charismatic. I admired him a lot for what he was doing," he recalls. "The only condition of the job was that I didn't return to school. But money was money, and I was learning more in the field than I had been in a classroom, so I took him up on his offer." With that, in 1956, he left school and began working full time.

Jim spent the following eight years working at the Creative Arts Studio, where he was involved in a wide variety of commercial art, including animation, brochures, and photography. The company was proficient in adapting to whatever the client requested—a skill set that Jim absorbed thoroughly. Throughout his time at the company, he moved up through the ranks until he was named Art Director. It was a prestigious title, yet also marked the highest he'd be able to ascend in the organization. "I saw a lot of other people breaking off from their companies to start their own business, which made me realize that as long as I worked for someone else, my future was limited," Jim recounts. "I knew how to run a business just from observation and being aggressive about taking opportunities, so I approached my two partners, and we decided to make it happen."

Although White+Partners has experienced significant growth and development over the near-half century of its lifespan, the company has never failed to offer the highest quality of services in art, design, and advertising. "I've always really valued our reputation because it has my name on it," he smiles. "In the old days, there were four top design studios in the Washington area, and we were always ranked one or two." The company has been known for high quality work that adapts to the changing cultural and business world, to such an extent that Jim has worked with big name clients that include National Geographic, Time-

Life Book and Records, Amtrak, and the Smithsonian Institution. His work is used to raise awareness, including an anti-smoking poster series involving cartoon animals advising children not to be 'A dumb bunny!' The posters were featured in elementary schools nationwide, including the schools his own children attended. Years later, Jim's daughter pulled out one such poster and told him she never once tried a cigarette because the images of his cartoons stayed with her throughout her formative years.

Although he was sure the day would never actually come, Jim eventually retired full time in 1996 as a result of health problems that compromised his vision. When reading and drawing became more taxing for Jim, he began easing back gradually on his work, slowly beginning to meditate on his next move and the future of the company. The idea of acquisition was entertained; however, Jim wanted more for his company than to become what it once had been during the early 70's. He then turned his hopes to his son, Matt, who had earned a degree in Marketing and Communications from Boston University and was at the time working for a major advertising agency in New York City. Jim invited his son to join the family business, which he did in the mid 1980's. "He had the experience from his work in New York City to see things from another side," Jim explains. "He had the creativity as well as the insight into how to run a business, so he came in initially from the account side, whereas I had always been on the creative side. Even if I wasn't directly drawing, all creative output had to pass my eyeballs before it went out the door, so it was important that I found someone I could trust." Jim steadily began involving Matt more and more in the management and decision-making process of the company, so that by the time Jim was ready to leave, the company passed seamlessly to Matt's hands.

Now that Jim has successfully stepped away from day to day management of the company that became White+Partners, he has invested his efforts into creating a long-term plan that will allow Matt to gradually buy all of the company's shares, keeping the firm in the family. The plan has been set up in such a way that, should the family decide to do so, Matt can one day pass the company on to one of his two daughters as well.

When it came to leadership challenges, Jim

often found himself doing exactly what he asked his team to do—getting creative. "Sometimes there are struggles between the client and one of my creative people, since the client wants things a certain way, and the artists want to have their creative freedom," he explains. "When this happens, I remind my artist that the customer pays their salary, so they have to come to some sort of compromise." While he often acts as the peacekeeper, he finds it equally important to never ask something of an employee that he would not do himself. "It's essential to treat everyone professionally," he says. "I don't tolerate any type of disrespect, whether it's a client or another employee. I try to run a very professional operation with everyone treating each other well."

While most aspects of leadership come naturally to Jim, he feels the hardest part of his job has been letting an employee go. As the economy fluctuates, advertising tends to be the first item on the financial statement to be slashed, so he has been forced to stay in tune with the cycles of the business world around him. While letting a valued employee go has never gotten easier, he finds both comfort and great pride in the success the company has found, and that after nearly a half century of being in business, White+Partners seems to only grow stronger.

In advising young people entering the workforce today, Jim stresses the importance of hard work and perseverance. "Be the best you can possibly be at whatever you do, and it will pay off," he encourages. "And don't be afraid of hard work or hard decisions." And as always, Jim emphasizes that the creative process can be applied to one's career search to engender even greater success: with careful research and preparation, as well as inspiration and passion, barriers fall away.

Now that Jim has settled into retirement, he has been able to revisit his relationship with art on the level with which it began: for the pure pleasure of it. He keeps a studio in his home with ideal lighting and breathtaking mountain views, which inspire him to paint landscapes and seascapes. After a lifetime of creating in order to meet a deadline, he finds joy in working with non-commercial oil paints to create a piece at his own pace, and for his own purposes.

"I love creating something from a blank canvas," he smiles. "After all this time, it's still fun, which is why I made a career out of it in the

first place.” And while the artistic base of his career has rung true throughout his life, he finds comfort in having been able to apply his creativity to his running a business. “If there’s one thing I have to say about business, it’s that you have to reinvent yourself constantly,” he says. “It’s sort of like driving a car. Only one person can drive at a time, and only one person can make a decision. The passengers can offer their counsel and insight, but ultimately it’s just up to you, the driver, to figure it out. That’s what creativity is all about.”

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President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).



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