

Randy Souders

Artist

*Interview conducted by
Kayla Gray and Sharron Gray
In 2018 in Ft. Worth, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Randy Souders was born in Oklahoma but spent most of his life in Texas. When he was in his late teens, Souders damaged his spinal cord in a diving accident at Benbrook Lake. After going through rehab for several months, Souders adjusted to life as a tetraplegic.

Souders enjoyed creating artworks at an early age. After his accident, Souders continued to paint. He attended Tarrant County College and later transferred to the University of Texas at Arlington. After earning his degree in 1978, Souders became a professional painter. By 1990, he had already created works for Disney. As of 2018, Souders lived in Fort Worth with his wife and granddaughter.

Topics discussed

- Early life
- Spinal cord injury
- Early interest in art
- Attending community college and a university
- Work with Disney
- Subject matter in works
- Disability activism with the Kennedy family

Souders

<topic>Early life</topic>

...in Texas. Cleared out into the valley. I was actually born on a farm and my first home was in the middle of a cotton patch in Oklahoma. We moved to south Texas too. My dad was going to get in the citrus business, but that really pan out. So, on the way to Oklahoma, they stopped in Ft. Worth and he thought it was a really good place to get on the farming business. And this is where we stayed. But I grew up probably within a mile of where I am now. And so...Ft. Worth has been the only place I've ever known really as a home.

Gray

Okay. Now what is your disability?

Souders

<topic>Spinal cord injury</topic>

I have a spinal cord injury, which I received from diving into a local lake like Benbrook. Just about two or three months prior to my 18th birthday. So I hit something submerged. I don't know if it was a rock or a log or a tree stump, but I hit it head-on and a couple of vertebrae in my neck burst and caused a compression and jamming up my spinal cord. Which like a closed injury, head injury, there's some instant trauma. But there's also after that some swelling that really has no place to go when it's encased in the bony vertebrae. So that was an instantaneous paralysis that happened. And it was really like being jerked out of one body that worked and put into another that didn't. And it was very traumatic physically. And then after that, there was the whole sort of dealing with a new identity and who am I. How do I fit in the world? That kind of thing.

Gray

So how long were you hospitalized?

Souders

Well this wasn't...I was actually in a hospital five months, which was sort of like. It wasn't the Dark Ages, but it was...it hadn't yet started very like. Any more as someone has my type of injury, they're taken to a hospital and stabilized. In my case, I was put in traction with, so holes drilled in my head and a device attached to keep me straight and mobile. Anymore, they put something that you wear a halo device and you're stabilized and as quickly as possible, specialized therapeutic – specialized rehabilitation center. In my case, I was just in a hospital setting, really not getting any rehabilitation at that point. After which, I was transferred to a place in Dallas. That was a rehab center. What they did was basically try to show you ways where you can function that actually just go home. That was basically...you rehabilitate. It's to go home and stay there.

Gray

Uhm.

Souders

That was pretty much the whole goal of the place.

Gray

So, it's a paralysis from the waist down?

Souders

It's actually...it began. In the beginning, all I could do was shrug my shoulders. I couldn't control my arms. Couldn't feed myself. Do anything. Over the next few months, I regained a degree of control of my arms. So, both arms are still affected. I'm technically called a tetraplegic, not a quadriplegic or a paraplegic. Paraplegic is just the lower limbs. But in between. So, all four limbs are affected. I got decent use of my arms. I got grip in my right hand. Course I'm left-handed. So, I got no finger movement and ability to grip in the hand that I

actually paint with. So, everything I do is with wrist and arm movement. And I accomplish it on an incline board so that I can stabilize my forearm and get a sense of control over it. So...

Gray

That's amazing.

Souders

I got varying degrees of feeling all over and some movement. So I had a very incomplete injury, as opposed to somebody who suffered a... like when their spinal cord is severed in a auto wreck or blown away with a gun shot. Mine was just like everything was jammed really hard and scrambled. And again, just the ability to communicate up and down the spinal cord was impaired. And it was the result of the lack of blood flow. And eventually, there was cord death that takes place. And there's atrophy that happened as well. So... but I recovered what I had and tried to make the most of it. So... but that's been a long time ago, so I'm an old...as they say "old quad".. Not I'm not "quad". I'm just...this is normal for me. I only spent less than 18 years being up and able-bodied and mobile. And the rest of my life has been in a wheelchair.

Gray

So, can you tell me more about your works?

Souders

<topic>Early interest in art</topic>

Well actually I'd always have a knack for drawing. I was sort of singled out for that early on. I grew up at a time when there wasn't a lot of other distractions other than television. And back in the '60s as a kid, you had three channels until Public Television came along. Then there was four. And they actually ended the day at about ten o'clock. But televisions would go out a lot. They would...the tubes would burn out. And my folks weren't big on getting them fixed real quick and it was just a little black and white TV that...if there were cartoons on after school or on Saturdays. Or on evenings, it was like Westerns was the big deal. If there was a television, I'd be watching it. But when there wasn't access to that, I was always drawing and daydreaming in the end.

So, I always had the knack for drawing and as I got closer to high school...I went to a technical high school down near downtown. Tremble Technical, that had a commercial art program, which was three hours a day of art training. And I thought this would be a great thing to do because I could possibly earn a living doing something related to art, which as a kid all the way up until the day I got injured, the way I earned money was doing lawn work. So any job that was indoors doing art in air conditioned...

Gray and Gray

(Laughter)

Souders

...I thought was a big step up. So, I always hoped to be either in commercial art ideally as an illustrator, but of course all of that was taken away as soon as I was injured. Though a few months into my rehab, I had a rehabilitation therapist, who made a point of looking beyond me just as a patient or an injury or whatever, and asked what my interests were and what all. And they said, "He used to like to draw and paint. And so, I was taken down to the therapy room one day and they had a table set up with some watercolors and things. And I

really didn't care to try that because they had me set up an easel thing over my hospital bed and a device that attached to my hand and try to get me to learn how to draw or to write again. And it was really awful because I didn't have the control and I later learned it was because I couldn't steady my forearm. I was just trying to do everything with my shoulder. And so even writing my name looked like as bad as a first grader. But when I was sitting upright, I.. At that table and my forearm was able to rest on it, I had a much greater sense of control at that point. My arm wasn't shaking and jerking around. And I painted a little Christmas tree, which really wasn't half bad, I thought. And it was like pretty much like an instantaneous... or like a light going off that said, "Hey, I might be able to do this again if I work at it." So that was the one thing that I could hold onto that really everything else had been taken away that I thought that I would be able to do. And so, I started doing artwork fairly aggressively at that point.

Gray

Okay, cool. So you have...well, let's see. You've worked with major companies like Disney. Have Disney made accommodations for you?

Souders

<topic>Attending community college and a university</topic>

Well yeah. And I would say that...backtracking a little bit. When I was injured, it was 1972. That was before...even before the House Resolutions 504 that came out stating that any organization that received public funds must make accommodations for physical. Literally you cannot go anywhere really. There just were not ramps to get in. Somebody had to lift you up and bounce you over a stair. You could not get into a bathroom that...anywhere. You couldn't fit a chair through a door or even through into a stall or whatever. So, when 504 came around, there's starting to be some awareness and some effort made towards at least putting in ramps. So, there were no real standards as to what that meant. Some were fine and others were just downright treacherous. As a matter of fact, there was one at the Art and Architecture building at UTA when I was there that was pretty, pretty sketchy. It was a ramp, but it was about a 30° or 40° angle going down. It was pretty long and wide. And you really had to watch yourself trying to...if you had the muscle power to get up it, even just coming down it was...So while the efforts were being made, there were some...there were really just no standards until the ADA was signed in 1990.

But...so by the time between HR 504 being in acted, that was what I think '74. I graduated from UTA in '78. And basically, I went...first I went to Tarrant County College, which was nearby, primarily because I could get into it. That was the thing. My mother would drive me there. She would sit in the common area and knit while I went to class and then bring me home. After a semester of doing that, she thought, "Well I could get my GED." 'Cause she had married when she was 17. She got her GED and by the second year, she decided to start taking classes, hopefully to be a teacher's aide. And so, by the time both of us left Tarrant County College, I went to UTA. She went to TWU. And we both graduated at the same time because she is a full-fledged teacher.

And so back to the accessibility, I went to Tarrant County College because it was relatively accessible to a person in a wheelchair. And then onto UTA for a similar reason. And also because they had handicap services there, which were headed by Jim Gray...Jim Hayes I'm sorry. And so that was additional support and it was...you know, him being in a wheelchair himself and there were sport services, such as having an assistant, a roommate in the dorm. I lived on campus during the week and came home on weekends. And so that was my first time as a disabled person living away from home, away from people who had provided a measure of care giving. I was able to dress myself and feed myself and actually had a small refrigerator and a hot plate to cook for myself by then. So I was making fast progress you can say, but...So again, going from that early stage through college years, I graduated in 1978.

I won an internship at an ad agency and worked there for a few months until I was actually offered a chance to show some paintings by one of our clients, which was a bank. I had a few paintings there at the ad agency to be photographed. And they asked, "Who did these?" "Do you have more?" "Do you ever do shows?" And they said, "Well, if you put some frames on them, then we'll...we can show them to the bank. Send out invitations."

So, I did and we...people came and I sold a few paintings. And they were like \$25-, \$30-, \$40-original paintings back then because I was hoping to sell enough to get more art supplies. And I thought, "Gee, this is a lot easier...or a lot more fun than getting dressed every day, driving to Arlington to an ad agency, having to wear shoes and do all that kind of thing. I thought, "Maybe I'll try this a while because I was living in a home. I had free room and board with my folks. I was out debt...I didn't have any debt, so I began that. I started showing it in some banks until I realized that most people coming to a bank were there to cash their checks or do their business and leave. And I went to a art and craft show that was down in Waxahachie. And it was there that I discovered that there was this whole circuit of public art shows and craft shows that happened around the state every weekend ten or twenty or fifteen times over. There are places to go and show your work. And so, I did that and things really took off. I started selling. I was able to raise prices. And by 1980, I got to the printing of my work. The actually publishing, which was like a musician getting into the record business. They were making what you do affordable and accessible to a much wider audience. So, I do in addition to one of my paintings and make 500 prints. And my first entry into that was basically a fundraiser. It was for the National Paralysis Foundation here in Ft. Worth that was run by a quadriplegic fellow named Jim Gray that...and I just did it because they absorb the cost of the printing.

I got the experience and was able to see if it actually works and then gained some collectors that way. And so that...my second and third edition that I put out different prints. I was pretty much starting to make fast progress because when you reproduce your work, then you are getting into the framing business and that required having others to help with that. So I started. I was relying on my parents and siblings and before long everybody was working for me. My mother eventually left teaching to run the gallery operation. My dad had worked his whole life in the school system since moving to Ft. Worth, so he was doing framing. And we were loading trailers and having touring shows. Some years we would do thirty-five shows a year. Public shows traveling all over the country. In addition to printing and mail order and shipping to other galleries. I had something that helped them sell frames. So we would wholesale prints to them. They would make money on the retail of the of the print and the frame, so things just blew up real big, real fast.

Souders

<topic>Work with Disney</topic>

And so, by 1990, I stumbled across a buyer for Disney. And my normal work...she bought for a number of the area's Mainstreet USA and Old Liberty Square area of Disney World, and which were more Americana type things. So, I was doing a lot of that. And so, when I went to Disney, so she said, "Do I ever do public shows?" Because she said, "I think your work will sell in the areas that I buy for." But she said, "I can have you out for a week or so and we put you up and pay all the bills. And basically, what you have to do is pretend to paint for about four hours a day." And a lot of guest want to see something creative...

Gray

Right.

Souders

...going on. So, I said, "Well that's great."

And so I had just gotten married or was set to be married in June 1990 and I said, "Well if we do it on the week after my marriage, I'd get a honeymoon courtesy at Disney. Out of sort of a working honeymoon. But so they set up a spot for me in a shop called Old World Antiques. And they promoted the good signs around the park that I would be there painting and personal parents' kind of thing. But prior to going, there I thought I would start...I thought I would do a painting of something that the guest at the park would recognize and appreciate. So, I started a painting of Cinderella castle, which was right out the front door there. And it was...it appeared really far along because paintings tend to take shape really fast. And then for me, it's a lot of polishing and

adding details afterwards. And about...and my other work was selling well. But about three days into it, the person who had me out got a call from somebody at there at Disney's executive offices saying, "What's going on? You've got somebody there. I hear your selling prints of Cinderella castle. And he's not licensed and blah, blah, blah." And the lady goes, "Hold on! Hold on! He's not selling anything. But people are leaving their names while you print for these things. So, you better get those guys signed."

So, they sent a car and whisked me off to some offices at Disney design group. And what was the name of it? And they looked at what I have, and they handed me a stack of papers, contracts, and said, "Well, we are a licensing agreement." And they said, or an art services agreement, and they said "We like what you do and we can probably keep you as busy as you want to be."

That started off in the first Cinderella castle that I start painting on. They purchased a big amount of money.

Gray

Wow!

Souders

And in the five figures nicely. And actually \$25,000. But they owned a copyright to their imagery to begin with. They pay nicely because of that. But they first...they did 1,000 lithographs at \$250 apiece, which they sold. And Disney doesn't have to put a lot of effort in selling stuff. People just came in and buy. So, they generated a quarter million dollars off that one image.

Gray

Wow!

Souders

And then they made images like that. There is a clock up in that case there. That kind of blue image. That's...

Gray

Is that it right here?

Souders

Yeah. They did clocks and watches and...and they made some pullover watches and carriage clocks and other as they call "collateral merchandise". And then by 1992, they began what they call the office Disneyana Convention, a collector's convention of people who collect Disney art and collectibles and figurines and things of that nature. And they asked me to do the convention poster for it each year. And it was like a week-long event of some of the most fanatical Disney collectors that were out there. And so it was a big extravaganza of events and behind the scenes things and they would bring in celebrities and movie stars and people like that. And have banquets and saw movies auctioning off stuff. You could a get a Dumbo car from like the ride, original artworks, and just anything you can imagine. And so that kicked off a ten-year run of doing those conventions. I did every one of the conventions. They alternated between Disneyland and Disney World. So as far as the accommodations, by the time I began with Disney, I pretty much had it down as far as what it was I needed. Which wasn't more than an inclined drafting table. Hotels were still, you kind of had to make sure that you could

get a room that you can get into a bathroom. But by then, there were ramps and elevators, so the accessibility was...and accommodation was pretty good and granted nothing like today. Today's like...someone who's injured or newly disabled today, physically, it's pretty much just everything's wide open for you. There's not a lot of problems, except for the odd, small business that 20..oh gosh, however many 27-8 years after the ADA? They still haven't made any effort to make those reasonable accommodations and they're basically just waiting to get caught and then complain that somebody had sued them for not making a reasonable effort. There might be a small cost involved, but a little business. You know, the law can't be so on us to put them out of business, but if they could put a little ramp in or widen the door or something like that, that's a fairly reasonable thing. And you know what? I remember back in the early days that there were people who literally say, "Well why do we need all those ramps? There are no disabled people. There are no people in wheelchairs that would ever come here."

And that's like, "Well duh!"

Gray

Well maybe that's why.

Souders

But, also now with the advances in technology, especially in computer technology and all...and the world opening up, yeah people with disabilities are viable, employable folks with money to spend and yeah. So it's in a business's best interest to be accommodating. But I literally remember back in the early days, if in the rare occasions that I would go out in a public place, to like a mall, young kids would like point and go, "Mom, look!" And it's like, "Oh you being in a wheelchair is like a Transformer or something." You're like something they had never seen! And now I can just be a potted plant. The awareness has just made leap year. So I'd sort of come from that time people in wheelchairs just weren't commonplace. They weren't seen on television. They were talked about. It was still...it wasn't that far removed from the old days. When, especially after World War II and the country decided it would do whatever it took to provide a place for returning soldiers who were injured, disabled, to live in big homes and institutional type settings. Better to make an accommodated place there than have to change the rest of the world. But there was also still that sort of old shameful of being disabled. It was kind of a shameful thing. And countries like Japan were, up until the '80s and '90s, it was still rather shameful for one to be disabled. You didn't want to have the rest of the world have to make an effort or incur...you didn't want to be a burden on anyone else. You felt that you didn't want to cause the rest of society to have to stop and wait and provide for you and your needs...So many people with disabilities would just stay home and out of sight. And that has changed to a great extent. And that has a lot of the rest of the world.

Gray

Okay. Awesome. So, I noticed that you paint a lot of buildings. Is there a reason why you paint buildings?

Souders

<topic>Subject matter in works</topic>

Actually, as best as I can figure. I've always enjoyed traveling and go places and see things. And I could find places. The irony is that most of the places I painted were ones that I probably could not physically get into if I can. So maybe there's some kind of one. When I began my career, most of the artist that I exhibited with...it was kind of a joke that the world was dominated by cowboys and ducks. It was western and wildlife type imagery. And I was one of the few people that did places, land and sort of architecture or interior still lifes that kind of thing. But it was something I like to do. I didn't know wildlife; you know cowboy stuff. There were so many people who know that...that field inside and out. And it just wasn't my thing. I didn't have any experience with it. I don't do portraits or people as a primary subject, even though they do work their way in from time to time, but I can't figure anything beyond that. That I just made places. And the interesting thing is stuff that I

was doing back then, and that I continue to do, seems to be as something that I won't take credit for. Maybe I was channeling some sort of broader interest because towns have begun building replicas of...you used to take places like. They're building this older style. New towns. They were like they want that sort of nostalgic feel to their town's square. You get like the developments like Southlake and the places around this area. Some are...Mainstreet USA or Hometown, America kind of thing. Kind of have that look and feel to them. That preservation...that historical preservation movement kind of kicked that off or began to rise. It seemed, at the same time that I was doing what I was doing, now you've got a number of new developments that are doing more Old World type imagery like French villages and things like that. So, you see a lot of that sort of nostalgia creeping in. And nostalgia I think runs about 50 to 70 to 80 years. Nostalgia keeps getting newer. A lot of people...today you see a lot of they call modernist movement. The modern architecture. The more boxy and sort of most of the...a lot of the condo complexes and things like that is modern. Well that was created back in the '20s and '30s. I meant it's...this is just the latest nostalgic movement. It's nothing...it's not really contemporary something that's being invented today. There's...they're harkening back to an earlier era doing this. The big one, the big decorating trends is mid-century modern furniture. We got some of it here that we just picked up along the way. And mid-century modern, you are talking about the '40s and '50s and early '60s. So...

Gray

So, what goes around comes around.

Souders

The nostalgia...it's still lagging back. And it's also comes through its rose-colored glasses kind of thing. Because you know, everyone thinks the past is more rosy and quite that it really was and... And I actually was selected to be on a focus group panel. This was in probably the mid-'80s. A local research group contact me and asked me to be on this focus group. They said it was to discuss the...explore the feasibility of residential living in downtown Ft. Worth. And at the time there was absolutely nothing going on down there. I mean there were homeless people sleeping in the doorways on main street. At six o'clock downtown Ft. Worth pretty much vacated and the workers went home. And so it involved two or three surveys online interviews and things like that...I mean phone interviews for the blind back then. And then culminated at a luncheon, one of the clubs on top of the bank one building downtown, which is now a condo complex. And you know everybody around who were basically guys in suits. One artist...it was a chicken and egg thing. You need amenities such as restaurants, entertainment venues to get people to move down there, but you need people down there to support those things. At the end of the meeting, they unveiled the architect rendering of the Sundance West Project, which was kind of the first condo complex that Ed Bass was a local billionaire was developing. And at that time, there was really yet built the Caravan of Dreams outpost there. And they're wanting to expand on that. And now, every square inch that was available to live in. You know, the residential living in Ft. Worth has grown exponentially. It pushed out in every direction. It could, Ft. Worth has now one of the most thriving, active downtowns. The Sundance West Project they had this big part on main street. The galleries they took in front of the old stores there they called fasading, you know the fronts of the building and then renovated the interiors with new walls and electrical and flooring and things like that. And it created a very nice, sort of nostalgic area there on main street and of course the historic preservation that continued on so but built accessibility as soon as you go. And so...

Gray

So, I noticed with your paintings that you paint characters that are from the classical Disney period that lasted from the '90s up to the mid-2000s. Have you painted anything with the more recent movies?

Souders

I haven't done anything between...like beyond say *Beauty and the Beast*. Well, let me think. And by, interesting that you say classical; cause the enthusiast would start with the classical with the '30s or with the '20s. Like I did a piece for the 50th anniversary of *Sleeping Beauty*. I would involve, which was the 25th anniversary of *Beauty in the Beast*. Other anniversary type things. But as far as like *Toy Story* or...Disney has continued to not only develop new characters, but they also have acquired other characters like Winnie the Pooh was one of the earliest ones they acquired.

Then now they branched into kind of...they bought the Star Wars franchise. Then Marvel comics things like that it's because really...they were primarily...they were instrumental in the legislation to expand the copyright laws in America an additional 20 years. And the reason was that Mickey Mouse was about to turn 75 and he was about to become public domain. And so they made a big effort to extend the copyright laws, which as an individual artist my...I think my copyrights were part of that change and were valid for my lifetime plus 50 years of my heirs if you can add 50 years. And a work for hire, which is like what I want to do for Disney would be a flat 70 years from the date published. Well Mickey Mouse came out as a talky, so they had sound in 1929 or there about. He was turning 70. So that would mean that anybody could create Mickey Mouse movies and merchandise and all and not have any restraints on them or pay any royalties or anything like that. So that added 20 years to the individual artist copyright.

That's my lifetime plus 70 years and work for hire was extended to 90. But eventually, you know that things will eventually have to hit public domain. And I think Disney realized that when that law was being debated. One of the entities that opposed it was the Library Association. They felt like books should come into the public domain that we should be paying the great-, great-grandchildren of Mark Twain royalties or Charles Dickens or people like that. You know eventually, things need to become available for anyone to use. And the internet is...has come along and people expect it to be free, even though they're not. They use that, nonetheless. And copyright enforcement becomes a bigger and bigger problem, but Disney has acquired this new businesses, new lines, new franchises that they're incorporating into their umbrella as well as their new...their movie *Frozen* of being a good example of how they can still knock it out of the park. Our 20-month-old grandchild watches it over and over again.

Gray

(Laughter)

Souders

And though she can't really talk, she does all the gestures and screams at the certain points and carries on. It's amazing how they're able to affect children of all ages like that. And I don't see them stopping But it's a giant global, corporate entity that really gets most of its revenue from broadcasting from their television and sports channels. You've got the movie studios and the theme parks. So there are all different kinds of businesses, but another side story: Disney was the target of a takeover attempt in mid- to late-, maybe in the 1987-88 time frame by a notorious corporator who was intent of buying it and chopping it up and selling it off the three main components, being the theme parks being one, the movie studio being another, and they had vast real estate holdings. So being a third, he felt he could double his money doing that way.

There's a book called *Storming the Magic Kingdom* that really lays out what happened and it was a real tale of Wall Street intrigue and a lot of interesting moves by a lot of the powerful folk who wind up keeping it intact and ushering in the age of the rebirth. You had the movie *The Little Mermaid* came out. I forget what the next one was. I don't know if it was *Aladdin*. Or whatever. *The Lion King* hit it. It was massive. *Beauty and the Beast* and all the one's since then. So...and then Pixar, which they acquired. It was another acquisition. And they had a relation with Tim Burton, who did *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and others. And I did one piece that involved that. But, so again there's different and they continue to grow. And they do have an effort like most major corporations to be inclusive with their hiring and have disability supporting accommodations for employees as well.

Gray

Okay.

Souders

Let me know if we need to shorten things.

Gray

Oh no. You're perfect. So where can people actually see your work?

Souders

<topic>Works on display</topic>

Well right now, pretty much online. Just my name: Randy Souders.com. And I have a willfully outdated need of revision website, but I for years I established a gallery...had a gallery and framing operation here in Ft. Worth with three different locations. However in 1990, when Disney came into my life and all I decided I didn't really want to be in charge of a retail gallery and open and be responsible for the day-to-day operations of that. It was something I wasn't good at. I wasn't there. Always worked at home because I have weird hours and it's just easy to commute from one room to the next. And I didn't have a string of people coming in and at all if I were at the gallery. And so I was getting married and decided that ... you know folks have been there at the beginning. I really could have done nothing without their involvement in sport. And, so they were partners unofficially, but still in the spirit. In any sense of the spirit, so I felt that it was best that I compensate them by giving them legal ownership of the gallery, framing, and the show.

Much of the art show business...I wanted to concentrate on painting and overseeing the printing. That was basically the making of the images. And let people like them sell this stuff. And I would work through them like I would other galleries that when they sold something, I would get a piece of it and they would get a piece of it. And they were doing all of the framing for myself. They had other clients like the Ft. Worth school system, and they would do all the children's art programs and things like that. And so, they eventually began that brand. You know, I think we opened our first gallery in '84 maybe.

Actually, the first one was in the house. It was another house we lived in. We just like started hanging stuff all over the walls and walling off openings and had a bit of a showroom there and then it just got kind of too big for that. We had a big, double garage and we had a framing operation in there, so we eventually moved to a location downtown. It was an old candy factory that had an antique mall and it's called The King Candy Company. It's still there. Gigantic, big ole'...they made chocolate back in the turn of the century and had like 4 ft-thick walls, its own water system and it was a giant, four or five story building. But on one floor, it had a very large antique mall. And so, we rented a space a floor below them. And but underneath the antique mall this long, like 80ft long hallway that had a wall. They really couldn't rent as a booth space, but they said, "You know, we'll rent that booth to you as a booth."

It was like maybe \$80 a month or something. So, I had 80 ft. of exhibit space and the public was coming there seven days a week. And so, we were selling stuff there while doing our mail order, getting ready for shows, and had a showroom downstairs as well. And I begin having annual Christmas shows there and not the first one we had, but we had a guard who was always there. He said...he counted 700 cars that went clear down the street and went in parking lots. And so, it was nuts for a long time. So that was going on.

One other thing that related disability wise, in 1989, I went to Washington DC for...to participate in an international festival for an organization called Very Special Arts, now known as VSA Arts.com. And I spoke at a

one of the events there, exhibited work, and we had a big outdoor event at the Southlawn White House. Lots of celebrities from really A-list kind of people from you pretty much name it. There's a documentary called *From the Heart* that was made. Anyway, I also was, just prior to that had been working in Orlando with Humana Hospital. They had hospitals back then. Humana Hospital had a spinal center there. And the chief physician had received a Center of Excellence grant. A big chunk of money.

And he ends up buying my work to put in the hospital there. He and I over the years had hospitals and rehab centers by my work because it not only decorated the walls, but they used it as a "This is what shaped this guy's hand. And you can actually do a thing in all art. You can make something of yourself." I guess, so he invited me to come out. And he said, "Take the money and mount an art show featuring the artworks of disabled artists." But he said, "So I want like really top-notch artists whose work is good, not just good considering their disabilities and looking for a museum-quality type show."

And so, what he and I originally...his thought was to maybe have something in the hospital out in the parking lot or something. Before it was over, we had a big committee. The budget exploded and it wind up being an event at the Orlando Museum of Art. And along the way, we...that's when I learned about Very Special Arts and someone said that there's this organization in DC that does some of...but they don't have things like this kind of component, this museum-quality or this really higher-level. And so, they got it all. And through that I met the VSA founder, Jean Kennedy Smith, and she attended the event. The only nice. She was very nice and gracious. She invited me to DC to speak at the event I was talking about in '89. And then in 1990, she asked me to be on their board of directors...

Gray

Wow!

Souders

...which I thought was great because I'm an advocate for arts and the healing power of arts and disability. And... but I didn't know that it was as big as it was. We were at that time fifty states and about 50 or 60 foreign countries.

Gray

Wow!

Souders

<topic>Disability activism with the Kennedy family</topic>

And we were an affiliate of the Kennedy Center and in funded a large part of a live item from Congress. And so I didn't mind the power I had on the thing. But through that, I wind up...it opened up a lot of other doors. I was able to travel the world, advocate on behalf of the arts, and entertainment programs. I went to DC a lot. I spoke on Capitol Hill. I did a bit of lobbying. We...every budget sees there's a group that wants to chop off any funding for any art program and things like that. But we would always not only prevail, but complete with an increase and because we can show good work that was being done and we sort of did the loaves with fishes sort of thing with the money we received. But through that association, I got to meet and befriend the members of the Kennedy family. Jean is the sole-surviving sibling of JFK at the moment. She's 90 years old now. But she's been a wonderful person. In 2011, Obama, President Obama, gave her the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her work with arts and disability. She appointed the Ambassador of Ireland by Bill Clinton. And so, we affectionately refer to her as Ambassador Smith now. But she would call and do some interviews.

And she would...she wrote a book called *Chronicles of Courage* and she put a chapter about me in the book.

And it was published by Random House. And she co-wrote it with George Plimpton in there, whose an amazing character in his own right. He's an author and actor and he was the co-founder of the Paris Review, which was a literary publication. So, through the two of them, he was a longtime family-friend of the Kennedy family. And so, there were a lot of "pinch-me" moments in that association. Being and having dinners at Ted Kennedy's house. Now I know what it's like being in an inside a *Life* magazine article with the photos of the family and all things like that. So, a lot of great memories traveling around the world and being a cultural ambassador for arts. And again, the program still goes on. In fact, Start with the Arts is one of our signature books that we put out for early childhood arts program. I wrote the introduction called, "Putting Creativity to Work", which is a career guide for people looking for careers in arts and art-related programs. It's available online now. Free for download if you look it up. But...so just countless type of things like that. I think it made a positive impact on a lot of folk.

And now being an artist with a disability is not such a rarity anymore. I'm not so special...

Gray and Gray

(Laughter)

Souders

...like I used to be. I used to get press like crazy. It really...but I haven't been through that. I haven't sought out quite a while. It just kind of rolled towards me. So, I take that as a good sign that I'm not such an oddity now.

Gray

We may have to cut the interview short because the battery's low. I changed it, we just used cheap batteries.

Souders

AAs, AAAs...what are they?

Gray

These I believe they're AA.

Souders

I got plenty of AAs right here.

Gray

Oh okay, thank you. But let's see. We may have to stop the recorder.

Souders

We may have to run out. But I do rap a lot.

Gray

It's alright.

Interviewer

Do you have it on your phone?

Gray

Yes, I do have it on my phone, but that's why I was checking my phone because you know.

Souders

Oh, okay. Like I said, we got a bunch of Duracells in there from Costco, so we can switch them out.

Gray

My thing is will it save if we stop the recording.

Gray

Oh, okay.

Souders

Okay.

Gray

But it looks like we've reached a stopping point here.

Souders

Okay.

Gray

So, this is Kayla Gray interviewing Randy Souders at his home in Ft. Worth. Signing out.

End of Interview

