

LEON THEODORE CHAMPIONED ART EDUCATION

When they attend the Winter Park Sidewalk Art Festival, thousands of people cross the railroad tracks to view artwork by students from Orange County schools. But few know anything about the man for whom the Leon Theodore Schools Exhibit is named.



Leon Theodore

Theodore, who moved to Orlando from New Orleans in 1960, became an art teacher at all-black Hungerford Junior and Senior High School in Eatonville. In 1967, he was transferred to predominantly white Edgewater High School in Orlando.

Countless students — some of whom went on to careers in art or teaching — attribute their success to Theodore, who was described as strict but accessible and inspirational.

"I'll never forget Mr. Theodore's comments on the first day of class," says Joanie Forbes, who for more than a decade owned Joanie's Art Studio in College Park and now teaches at Park Maitland School. "He said, 'If you're sitting in one of my desks because you think this class is going to be an easy A, please get up and get out. I take teaching art very seriously.'"

The message resonated with Forbes, who says Theodore cared about his students and helped them gain confidence through creative expression.

She majored in art education at Mercer University "so that I could give back to students all that he had given me during my three years at Edgewater."

Theodore — who had attended Xavier University on an art scholarship — was named president of the Winter Park Sidewalk Art Festival executive board in 1983. He had previously helped to organize the student display that would later bear his name.

In addition, Theodore served on the Orlando Public Arts Board and the board of directors of the Callahan Community Center. As an artist, he won awards at festivals throughout the state with his striking multimedia prints.

He was later director of exhibits at The Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts, and gallery director and artist in residence at Bethune-Cookman College.

Theodore died in 1999 at 70. The following year, the art festival committee renamed the student display to honor a man who had championed the importance of art in education.

"I try to be a role model," Theodore told the *Orlando Sentinel* in 1988. "Being a black artist, there's no mistaking about my color. My students were asked to name some top black artist during Black History Month. Many named me. This made me proud."