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Blayne Keel, a custodian at Prescott Elementary School, also specializes in chalk art there, regularly decorating a chalkboard in the hallway with a variety of portraits, including this one of Leonardo da Vinci.

# Chalk

## it up to a love of art

BY DANIEL R. MOSER  
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The ego of an artist can be a fragile thing indeed. Not many would consent to work in a medium in which selling your work is impossible; in which, in fact, its very existence is temporary — subject to, at best, a slow and dusty fade or, at worst, a quick and brutal erasure.

That's the lot of Blayne Keel. Not that he's complaining, though.

Keel is a full-time custodian at Prescott Elementary School, a full-time student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a part-time artist in the halls of Prescott, where his remarkable work adorns a simple, green chalkboard.

Keel pauses two, maybe three, evenings a week during his break at

Prescott to take chalk in hand and create a portrait. His work, revealed to children as they arrive the next morning for class, has become a hit.

"The chalkboard was there and every once in awhile I'd draw something there," he said of his humble origins as Prescott's unofficial artist-in-residence. "The kids started liking it, so I kept doing it."

In the process, Keel has learned some ins and outs to working with this unusual medium. "A lot of times in art, if you want to do something different, you have to invent your own tools."

So, beyond the obvious — chalk and board — Keel has adapted small paintbrushes (to brush away chalk) and pencil erasers (to get a darker tone).

Keel's subjects are sometimes famous scientists — he's partial to physicists, he says — as well as other historically significant figures. Among the faces that have adorned Keel's "canvas" are Albert Einstein, Richard Fineman, Leonardo da Vinci, Robert Oppenheimer, Sitting Bull and Malcolm X. Keel also has a passion for blues music, which he occasionally indulges in his artwork: Obscure jump blues singer Amos Milburn was on the board one day; after Texas blues guitarist Albert Collins died, his passing was noted in a tribute on Keel's chalkboard.

Obviously, many of the figures Keel chooses to draw are not typical educational fare at the elementary-school level, he acknowledges. There's nothing wrong with that, he added.

"Sometimes the kids ask me about them, and I enjoy that," he said. Often, too, the text he'll jot down to accompany the portrait may be above grade-schoolers' heads.

"I don't think that hurts — for a kid to see a word he's never seen

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once in a while," Keel said.

Those bits of text are sometimes quotes from the figure shown, or maybe some thoughts from Keel inspired by the person.

Keel is now working on his teaching certificate at UNL. He previously earned an art degree which, he said, he could be using to make a living in the commercial art field. That doesn't appeal to him, though.

"I want to use my art to make things I want to make," he said. Still, he acknowledges, his dabbling in chalkboard art takes that independent, artist-not-for-hire identity to an extreme.

"I can't sell these. They're there and then they're gone," he said. "Right from the very beginning I knew if I drew something up there, it might not be there the next morning."

Despite the temptation, it's rare that Prescott students trifle with his work, Keel said. "I think that says something neat about the kids. I never come in and find it erased."

And, yes, Keel does do requests, which he often gets from students. They range widely: Among the requests now under consideration: the Three Stooges and Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee. The Stooges are fairly straightforward, Keel said. But he's still puzzling over Lee — not the drawing itself, but the message he wants to place alongside it.

One of these evenings, though, he expects to come in with an answer.

