

FORD FREEDOM AWARD

MEET FLOYD NORMAN

The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, in partnership with the Ford Motor Company Fund, celebrates significant leaders of the past and present each spring with its annual Ford Freedom Award Program. This year's theme is "Talents That Unite: How African Americans bring diverse communities together across America." A special part of the celebration includes the lecture to students by this year's Ford Freedom Scholar, Floyd Norman, a legendary animator, writer, comic book artist and filmmaker. The Yak recently had a chance to talk with Mr. Norman by phone before his first-ever visit to Detroit. Congratulations, Mr. Norman, and welcome to the Motor City. Thanks for Yakking!

BORN TO DRAW

Floyd Norman was born and raised in beautiful Santa Barbara, California, so it is fair to say that sunshine and art have always been a part of his life. In fact, Floyd can't remember when he started drawing, it's just something he has always done. "It's sort of an obsession that all young boys and girls have who want to draw and sketch and paint," says Floyd. "We really can't help ourselves. And we don't even know when we started, because we started doing this so early, as little children." Indeed, Floyd fell in love with art early, and the artist, who will turn 82 in June, has never stopped drawing.

As a boy, Floyd says he "drew pretty much everything. I probably ran the gamut of drawing funny characters and cars and trucks, and that kind of thing, but I was probably more focused on drawing people, more so than vehicles."

And, he says, the feedback was always positive from his parents, teachers and extended family. His grandmother, for instance, enrolled him in weekend art classes at the Santa Barbara Art Museum. "I think she recognized that this was something important, something I should be doing, so she encouraged me to take art classes, and encouraged me in everything I wanted to do." When Floyd was in middle school and wanted to make movies, his



Photo Courtesy of Michale Fiore Films
2017 Ford Freedom Award Scholar Floyd Norman, holding a camera he bought from Roy Disney, is pictured with fellow animator Leo Sullivan. The two artists formed Vignette Films in the 1960's and used the camera to film news events including the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965. In the back row are documentary filmmakers Erik Sharkey and Michael Fiore who made a movie about Norman.

grandmother helped him get a camera and camera stand so he could make short films. "I think she recognized that I was headed toward becoming a Disney artist and ultimately a filmmaker."

Floyd also distinctly remembers watching the animated movie about a circus elephant, "Dumbo," with his mother at the local movie theater and knowing right then and there that he wanted to make animated movies, too. "I remember listening to the voice of the stork. The stork was voiced by an actor named Sterling Holloway, and I remember listening to that voice as a little kid...." Years later, Floyd got to listen to that wonderful voice again, this time sitting next to the actor on a recording stage at The Walt Disney Studios as Sterling Holloway gave voice to Kaa, the snake, in "The Jungle Book." Floyd, who worked on the story team for the movie, says that moment "was a kid's dream come true."

Of course, art was always a favorite school subject when Floyd was growing up, but Floyd also loved writing, and English literature was a favorite high school

class. Floyd says he often persuaded his teachers to allow creative projects instead of the standard homework assignments. For example, in his high school civics class, he made a motion picture, tying in his classroom lessons with his passion for filmmaking. Floyd also played in his school's band and orchestra. He started out learning the violin but moved on to the clarinet, saxophone, and flute. Floyd says he never planned to play music for a career, but learning to read music turned out to be a wonderful skill for his career in animation and filmmaking! Floyd says getting in trouble for doodling in his textbook led to his first paid job. "My science teacher... saw me always sketching drawings and cartoons in my biology class," remembers Floyd. His teacher introduced him to local comic book creator Bill Woggon to work with him on his Katy Keene comics, which were very popular then.

After high school, Floyd earned a scholarship to ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, but left after three years to

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