Chalk it up to a love of art

BY DANIEL R. MOSER
Lincoln Journal

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 Blayde 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 passes 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 a while I'd draw something there. The kids started liking it, so I kept doing it," said Blayde Keel once in a while.

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 an independent, artist-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 up with an answer.

There are no green humans. So this chalkboard is neutral, around which I might point out with yellow chalk that our differences are quite superficial.

We all share the same sky and breath. Sitting Bull.