



Drawn to a Life of Art

Jim Lee '82 follows his heart, and his pencil

Jim Lee's fingerprints are all over the 1982 St. Louis Country Day School yearbook and, indeed, the two issues before. His art fills the pages, serving as section dividers and literal comic relief here and there. You'll also find his work sprinkled liberally through the pages of the *CDS News*, indicating how the young student would eventually spend his life even if he didn't realize it yet.

Lee didn't make the decision to attend St. Louis Country Day School; that was his parents'. They wanted him to have the best education to set him up for admission to a top university, where he would earn a respectable degree and live a solid, if dull (to him), professional life. Lee dutifully obeyed their wishes for years, eventually earning that solid, respectable degree from Princeton University. It was at this point he listened to the prediction his high school senior class had made and took a shot at a career very different than his pre-med track: he dove into the world of comics full-time, drawing a life that has included working at Marvel Comics and an independent creative consortium publishing creator-owned titles. He has steadily navigated a career as varied as the art he produces and now leads one of the world's foremost publishers of comics.

The president, publisher, and chief creative officer of DC Comics immigrated to the United States with his parents from South Korea when he was a child. The family moved to St. Louis when Lee was in fourth grade, and he transferred to CDS in seventh. "My parents wanted to put me in a more rigorous academic program," he said. They had friends with an older son at CDS who was thriving, and they wanted the same for their son. Lee did thrive, developing friendships and close bonds with both his classmates and his teachers. He admits that many of the extracurricular activities he chose—Model UN, Student Council, math team—were designed to look good on his college applications, but he also followed the lead of his friends. "We did all the same things," he said. "We were nerdy to the sublime. Our math team went to Columbia, Missouri, to participate in a math-off, and we won State. So I was a mathlete!"

He was also a contender for State honors in wrestling and played football, serving as co-captain of wrestling senior year. Track



and field, and one season of soccer when it moved to the fall his senior year, rounded out his athletic resume. He credits the mandatory sports program at CDS with helping him grow. "Being a scholar athlete definitely pushed me into areas I wouldn't have done on my own. It made me a better person and a better teammate and instilled a commitment to succeed in anything. I'm thankful for the experience."

Somehow, in the middle of captaining sports teams, editing both the yearbook and newspaper, traveling abroad, competing as a mathlete, and serving on Model UN and student council, he was drawing. He was always drawing, just for fun.

While he edited the yearbook and student newspapers, spending Saturdays and Sundays at friends' houses laying out pages using pica rulers, he had no idea that this experience would provide a solid foundation for his future lifelong career in publishing. "The pica rulers were useless by the time I got into the business, but it gave me a basic understanding of how much it cost in time, resources, and dollars to publish something. At the time, I didn't think any of it would lead anywhere, but it was all instrumental in shaping who I ended up being and how I got there in publishing." Along with the other responsibilities of editing student publications, Lee regularly dropped in his artwork, always with his initials embedded, sometimes obviously, and other times hidden. Troubadours and Masque productions at CDS benefited from his talent, using his work as their promotional posters and program covers.

Several teachers were formative in Lee's life. Dr. John Johnson, who also served as the head of school for a brief time, taught a classics course in ancient Greek and Roman history. Lee ate it up. "I thought it was amazing and ended up taking a repeat in college because I was so fascinated by the subject matter." He laughed when he

referenced a recent viral article about people who think about the Roman Empire daily. "I do think about it almost every day, and it's because of that class. I learned the impact those ancient civilizations had on modern-day civilization and political discourse." He also cites the influence of Dr. Albert Kalmar, a German teacher who inspired Lee to fall in love with learning about languages. "I have a very bad accent but can still speak German," Lee said, "and I went on to study and learn some Italian because of this positive experience." Dr. Kalmar took Lee and some of his classmates to Germany and Austria, which Lee credits with showing him the power of language and how being able to speak another language gives one access and insight into cultures not available to straightforward tourists. "You can see how language and culture and history intertwine. I still have such good memories, and it still impacts me positively to this day," he said.

One of those impacts derives from, you guessed it, the Roman Empire. "I've gotten a lot of cool character names from the Roman Empire," he said. He also enjoyed English history and cites the influence of William Hallet, who "taught history in a bemused but fair way. There's a lot to be learned there. Everything is a potential source of

>> continued on page 40

Jim's early art is shared throughout his high school publications, such as the CDS News and the CODASCO yearbook.



>> continued from page 39



01. The cover of *X-Men 1* from 1991.

02/03. Jim's personal work includes painting in acrylic.

04. Jim's family on vacation in Cabo.

inspiration. It's why I advocate for people to travel and push themselves out of their comfort zone and to seek and explore new cultures." Lee said that exploring culture and history and learning about the power of myths and legends can have a real impact on the people who read them. "We create modern-day fairy tales and parables," he said. "It's primarily for entertainment, but I've met so many people working in the arts—like graphic artists, actors, and designers—and comic books got them into storytelling and fantasizing and daydreaming about what the world could be." He's heard many stories of personal journeys that mirror his: moving from being a non-professional to working as a creative and building a career based on art.

His own art was fostered by CDS educator Dave Stevens, who Lee said was a great teacher. "He recognized my artistic ability early on," said Lee, noting that all the art classes were great but that they were, even then, perceived more as something students did while were working on getting the grades to apply to a good college. "They did teach me the fundamentals of drawing and painting as well, and I'm thankful for that base foundation."

"Every teacher was amazing, and it was the singular best academic education I could have asked for. Even in college, the classes were good, but they weren't as good as CDS, partly because CDS had smaller classes." His Calculus BC class rostered only five students, and his German

class numbered 12 to 15. For Lee, college was more about the transition to independence and governing his own schedule, and then the exploration of academic topics that interested him. "CDS gave us that base foundation of knowledge everyone should have. It was an incredible experience," he said.

He took full advantage of his beloved teachers, hanging out in their classrooms when he was between his own courses. "I'm sure we were annoying the hell out of them, but at the time, it seemed cool," he laughed. It's not that he and his classmates considered their teachers peers, but they had such close relationships that it was comfortable to spend time together in an informal setting. Lee also liked the senior lounge and spent a lot of time in the wrestling pits. He spoke about serving as a waiter at lunch. Two students from each table retrieved lunch for the boys and their teachers to eat family-style and cleaned everything up after, and he fondly remembers hot dogs wrapped in bacon and cheese.

Lee's experience at CDS informs how he parents his own children. He encourages them to take advantage of the resources that are available to them at their schools that are similar to MICDS. "When you go to college, part of it is to do well academically and set yourself up for postgraduate life, but you're not going to get a period of time like this where there are people paid to help you learn and better yourself. You'll never have a period of time where you can freely explore and learn about anything you want and have that kind of support and infrastructure behind you. Don't take it for granted, and appreciate it for what it is," he said.

He and his wife, Carla, live in Los Angeles near Warner Brothers, and have nine children in their blended family, ranging in age from 31 to 10. He loves to plan and enjoy huge family vacations with them. "We have to create a PowerPoint presentation with everyone's airline and itineraries, rental cars, etc. lined out," he said, and then added with a laugh, "And here's the floor



of the hotel where we'll be terrorizing the other guests." He likened it to traveling with a small army, sharing that sometimes they even include their pets. The Lee family has two cats and six dogs. "My wife is secretly replacing every child who goes to college with a pet," he said.

When he's not working or making epic vacation plans, Lee likes to paint, preferring to work in acrylic because it dries quickly. He makes portraits of his family members and pets and landscapes of places they've visited that are meaningful. "It's adjacent to drawing and illustrating, but it's different," he explained. "Rather than creating a form with a black line with pencil or marker, you're creating form with color. It draws upon the same knowledge but is expressed in a different, easy, relaxing way. I'm not great at it, so I still feel like I'm learning, which is a healthy attitude you should have toward arts in general. You always want to be thinking and growing and evolving. Painting keeps me renewed and creating art."

Although his work days are jammed with the business of publishing, he makes an effort to keep his drawing skills sharp. "I make sure I don't forget how to draw; that is a real concern," he said. "I maybe draw a cover or two a week, but no interior storytelling because that takes more time. When I was younger, I could burn the candle at both ends. I would do the day job and then draw late at night, getting by on three to five hours of sleep for weeks on end." He learned that sleep is imperative to a healthy life, trumping drinking, drugs, and a sedentary lifestyle. It was a wake-up call. "I realized I can't keep pulling all-nighters into my 50s, so I dialed that back," he said. "But I'm a night owl with doing creative work. I'm more focused, creative, and efficient. I draw faster late at night. There are distractions and errands and people awake during the day." He wants to return to full-time or semi-full-time drawing and creating content eventually. "It's something that will be part of my life forever, and to this day, it's still a joy to sit down and enter into this weird creative state and create something from nothing. I find it very satisfying, and it keeps me engaged."

He encourages today's art students to embrace those feelings of satisfaction and engagement. "Recognize that art is not just things you look at on the wall; it's not just something you do when you're bored and trying to kill time. It's a real vocation. I can't think of a life without art and creativity. If it appeals to you, embrace it, run

with it, and try to make it your destiny." At the same time, he channels the voice of his own parents: "Get good grades just in case, so you have something to fall back on." Art, though, can be a key to unlocking the world, just as it has for Lee. "I'm so appreciative of all the things I've gotten to experience because of the work I create."

A guest appearance on Sesame Street is one example. The production team reached out to Lee directly and received an instant yes from the artist because of the profound impact the show had on his childhood. "Sesame Street was how I learned English as an outsider in a new culture. It was amazing to close that loop and share my memories with the people who work on the show." He appreciates that Warner Brothers curates his guest appearances otherwise. "We live in a world where even fine art is commercial art, and every person is in some way their own brand," he explained. "It's essential to think about that aspect of how people look at you and your work and how it's perceived commercially. You want to make it as authentic as possible. That's what makes you stand out from others. It's not just how well you create art, but it's what you bring to life and the person you are, and the story you can share beyond the art itself."

"Social media grants access to everyone's thoughts and talents to sing and draw well. There aren't many people who haven't been discovered, but the ones who rise to the top are the ones with compelling stories, stories of inspiration, and stories of influence, and that's how you extend the impact of the work you create."

Jim Lee's story of success against the odds is exactly that compelling, authentic, inspirational tale. Perhaps one day he'll write an autobiography, in comic book form, of course. Until then, he'll keep drawing new worlds and painting his own, producing art that entertains and inspires his audience and, most importantly, himself.



01. Jim's drawing of the Joker for a charity drive to raise money for struggling comic book stores during the pandemic.

02. Jim with some Japanese fans in 2019, celebrating Batman's 80th anniversary all around the world. Jim traveled to the Shinjuku district of Tokyo to turn on the Bat Signal over the district's famous multi-directional crosswalk.