

Tyler is also where he met Mark Rounds – who I sincerely believed when he told me that he was Johnny Cash. Granted I was four years old at the time, but the resemblance was striking and the impression eerie. Papa and Mark bonded over pool, Frank Sinatra’s cover of “Winchester Cathedral,” and a love of biscuits and gravy, and they stayed best friends until Papa died – always either living together or sending each other frequent letters and postcards. While at Tyler they lived together on Old York Road, about a mile and a half away from the school.

According to Mark, in the beginning of his time at Tyler, Papa was “convinced he was gonna be a painter, like his dad,” taking only drawing and painting classes and sticking strictly to the classics. Only after a year or so did he start branching out and experimenting with other mediums, like printmaking, photography, and sculpture.

While at Tyler, Papa and Mark discovered the Russian Constructivist artists from the turn of the century, who had a huge impact on the way they thought about art. “Those guys were of the opinion that if you were going to call yourself a real artist, you had to be conversant in pretty much every discipline you could,” Mark explained. “They painted, they drew, they sculpted, they designed architecture, they did city planning, they made their own clothes.” The two tried to adopt this level of commitment, making everything in their lives about art. If they could only afford either paint or food, they took pride in having the discipline to choose paint – and they tried to familiarize themselves with as many mediums as possible.

In 1978, the summer before his junior year at Tyler, Papa went to the Yale Summer School of Art and Music. That’s where he met beautiful, blonde, rich and reckless Cathy Wehrli; referred to by Mark, Amy, and my mother as “his first great love.” He returned to Tyler after the summer program ended, but shortly thereafter he dropped out and moved to New Haven to be with Cathy.

Most of the people I've been able to interview met my father after Cathy died, so they can't speak to what she was like or the details of their relationship, but they were all struck by her lasting effect on him. Mark remembers her from when he visited Joe in New Haven in '76 and '77. "Cathy was a friggin whirlwind," he said. "Joe's nickname for her was Wehrli-Bird."

"She was a stunningly attractive girl," Mark remembered. "Really, really, monstrously pretty."

"We were all wildly in love with her," he added. "Everyone who met her had a huge crush on her, which caused a lot of problems. Your father was a really jealous guy." Apparently she had a habit of breaking up with boyfriends by showing up with a new one on her arm, and Papa lived in fear of being replaced.

When Cathy graduated from Yale in 1979 Mark, Papa and a few other friends helped her put up her senior show, which Mark described as a "really big to-do." The show consisted of large-scale paintings and "monstrous sculptures made out of garbage."

After her graduation, she and Papa moved to New York, to an apartment on 27th Street – which was, like most of New York, not nearly as clean or safe as it is now.

They both influenced each other's artwork, "they really played off of each other," Cathy's sister Joni told me.

"Joe was a real mentor for Cathy, he was very inspiring for her," Joni said, saying that Cathy always tried to live up to Papa's talent as a draftsman, worrying that she couldn't match him. She had an eye for color and the guts to do wild paintings that usually made an impression, if not always a good one, but she didn't have his level of technical skill.

Mark gave a more specific description of how they worked together, “When they lived together in Manhattan they would collaborate on paintings. She influenced him to get a whole lot looser in his work and he influenced her to put a bit more structure in hers. Essentially when they worked together, he would draw something and she would paint it. All of the drafting elements were his and a lot of the color choices and expressiveness were hers.” While he pushed her to be technically better, she encouraged him to experiment, to drown out his father’s voice pushing for perfection. She also provided him with the first archetypal symbol for his work.

Her husky dog, Travis, was the subject of many of both of their paintings. Dog imagery – a classic symbol of loyalty and devotion – persisted in his artwork for the rest of his life, and everyone I spoke to agreed that that started with Cathy. They also worked on pieces made out of trash, a continuation and expansion of the work she did for her senior show and possibly the birth of his obsession with found objects as materials. Joni remembered them making big, clunky bracelets and necklaces out of trash and wearing them around, not even taking them off to sleep or bathe.