

A Shared Passion for the Arts

BY LINDY T. SHEPHERD

Advocates of Central Florida's arts and cultural scene, University of Central Florida President Dale Whittaker and wife, Mary, are established artists in their own right.

It's a busy afternoon in the University of Central Florida (UCF) Art Gallery because of the closing reception that evening. Activity is focused on a visit by new UCF President Dale Whittaker, 57, and his wife, Mary, 56, whose vibrant fine art quilts are on display in the outgoing *2018 Faculty Exhibition*.

Mary stands for photographs in front of her storytelling quilt that pops with colorful appliques. A member of the Orlando Modern Quilt Guild, she was deeply involved in the group's response to the Pulse tragedy, with the guild creating and distributing more than 1,000 quilts to affected families. Inspired by her grandmother's quilts, Mary's dedication dates back to when she was a young girl watching her mother sew and then quilting for school fundraisers for her son and daughter, now grown.

Along the way, her studies with quilt artist Sue Spargo added a distinctive folk-art influence.

A short walk from the gallery, in the John C. Hitt Library, there are three paintings — two watercolors and an acrylic of Oscar the cat — in UCF's *Hidden Artists* exhibition. The identifying initials are "ADW," a.k.a. Dr. A. Dale Whittaker, the fifth president of UCF, unanimously confirmed by the Florida Board of Governors in March. Dale served as UCF's provost since fall 2014, and was promoted to executive vice president in 2015, coming from leadership positions at Purdue University and Texas A&M University.

Asked what sparked his interest in art, Dale says when he was about 12 he fashioned pieces of found driftwood and sprayed them with gold paint, and his mother put it out for people to see. He says she didn't make a big deal of it, but it was a positive nod, an affirmation.

Years later, with a doctorate in agricultural engineering from Purdue, Dale enjoys his own art studio in the Burnett House, the Whittaker's university-owned dwelling near campus. The space was previously used



HANNAH ESTES (2)

as an office by Martha Hitt, wife of longtime president John C. Hitt, who retired after serving from 1992 to 2018.

"It's all about process," Dale says of his art-making, "It's not about the outcome."

He says he once went through 60 canvases but brought none home from one of the artist workshops that he and Mary frequently attend.

Mary has her studio set up in a space over the garage that she shares with Oscar, which explains why she lovingly pulls a cat hair off her quilt just before the photo shoot and declares him "spoiled."

Another surprise expression of Dale's muse comes through his harmonica. Mary says he's been playing gigs ever since he joined in with Moonshine Mason & the Rot Gut Gang during his Purdue days in Indiana. These days, Dale says with a twinkle in his eye that we might catch him playing at The Alley in Sanford. **OAM**

Lindy T. Shepherd writes about the arts and culture in Central Florida, and works with the Orange County Arts & Cultural Affairs Office.