

PROFILES IN THE LAW

David Slader Delayed Pursuing Art to Forge a Legal Career

Helping Others, Healing Himself

By Cliff Collins

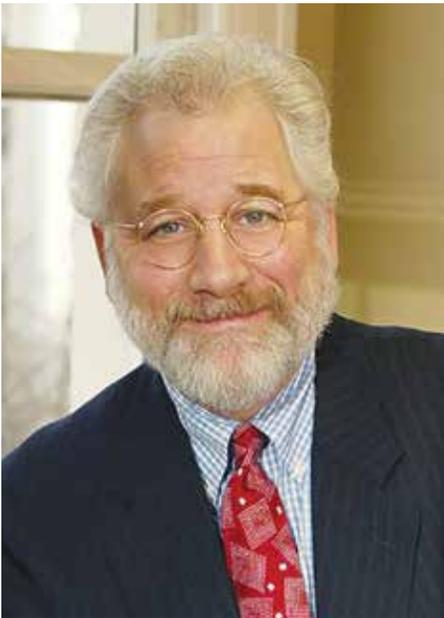


Photo by Owen Carey

“Art is freedom from all practical restraints. It is imagination unchained from purpose and unencumbered by function. Art is the freedom to create the improbable.”

—David Slader

With his paintings and artwork, retired plaintiffs’ attorney David Slader is making up for lost time.

Over the past decade, he has regained that “freedom to create the improbable” by returning to his first love. Slader had been encouraged by a school teacher to take art lessons. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago became his “second home” during high school, the time when he began collecting art books, he recalls.

His parents encouraged his interest in art, but “as I got later in the teen years, I was clearly getting the message that my fantasy of becoming a starving artist in Paris or somewhere” was not going to become a reality, he says. “My father in-

stilled in me the importance of earning a living, and he didn’t know any artists making a living.”

In “gentle and subtle ways,” he began steering his son toward more practical occupations, Slader says. “He saw law as something I would be good at.”

Slader majored in photojournalism in college at the University of Illinois, with the goal of becoming a war correspondent, hoping to become an artist who covered conflict. He knew something about conflict, because he had frequently gotten into fights when younger, always in an attempt to protect someone who was being bullied. He had been raised in a strongly ethnic neighborhood of Jews and Roman Catholics, and in his Jewish family, trying to heal the world was ingrained in him. His father suggested to him that “lawyers can really do something to make the world a better place.”

“I didn’t come into my own as a student until law school” at Northwestern, Slader says. What really fired his interest, though, was a summer clerkship with a prominent African-American criminal defense attorney named James Montgomery. “I just loved it, this sense that you’re representing the underdog against the powers of the state. It was the David and Goliath aspect of it, which is what got me into trouble in high school.” He decided then and there, “This is what I need to do.”

Slader worked for Montgomery for a time as a young lawyer. “He truly was my mentor. As a mature lawyer, I could hear his voice in my voice when I was in the courtroom.”

Representing Abuse Victims

Slader relocated to Portland and while looking for work, he taught legal writing



Photo courtesy of David Slader

David Slader’s early paintings focus on strong male images in bold, abstract color.

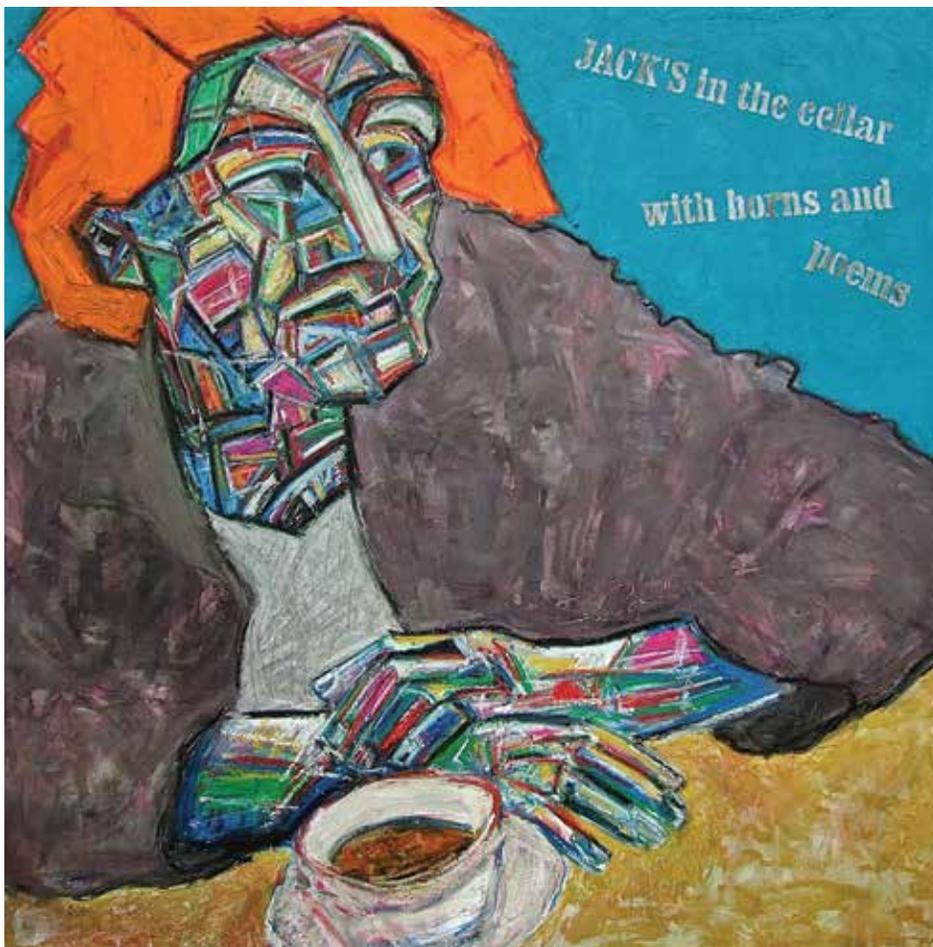


Photo courtesy of David Slader

In 2015, Slader begins to paint women, as in "Jack's in the Cellar With Horns and Poems."

at Lewis & Clark Law School. He was then offered a job to administer a three-year federal demonstration grant to provide legal services for children in child-abuse cases. It was intended to determine if offering legal counsel to these cases would produce better outcomes.

After the grant ended, Slader worked several years as a public defender, then in private practice in white-collar criminal defense. When then-Attorney General Dave Frohnmayer approached him about heading up a new division within the Oregon Department of Justice, Slader jumped at the chance. As chief counsel for the Civil Enforcement Division, he was charged with enforcing consumer protection, labor, antitrust, securities and child protection laws. The latter included termination of parental rights, aimed at counties that didn't have money to fund such efforts, so it directly evolved from the child-advocacy project Slader had started, he says.

Slader calls his approximately five years at the DOJ as division chief an "ex-

citing time. I was the first chief attorney of the division and had the opportunity to guide its direction, supervising the attorneys who represented the state as plaintiff on behalf of the people. But once the direction had been set and good people hired to guide each section of the division, I got a little bored with the administrative duties."

Later, while working at a civil litigation firm, he received a call from a young woman he had represented when she was a child who had been sexually abused. He had helped place her for adoption with a good family, and she thanked him. Then she asked Slader, "Are there any remedies against my mother's boyfriend who had molested me?" In 1993, the Legislature eliminated a provision in the childhood sexual abuse statute of limitations that barred filing of cases of childhood sexual abuse if the alleged victim had turned 40. Slader received two additional calls from former clients he had represented or their extended families. He went to the firm's partners and suggested that he wanted to

do that kind of representation, but the firm said the work didn't fit its role and would grant his request only if Slader took such cases pro bono, not as part of his regular practice.

Slader could see their reasoning, but he decided to go out on his own. Representing people who had been sexually abused as children was relatively new to legal practice at the time, he says, and the word had not gotten out to any extent that the statute of limitations had been extended. As a result, he struggled for a long while to build a practice. An unexpected call changed the direction of his practice for most of the final decade of his legal career.

"I got a case that broke things open," he says. A man came to him saying he had been abused as a child over a period of years by a Roman Catholic priest. The man had contacted a half-dozen attorneys to see if they would represent him, and none would, explaining that they had no experience in that type of case. Slader agreed to take the case. His investigator found the priest, who was living in a retirement home. "I went back on my experience," Slader says. "I knew some of the best evidence was based on phone conversations with perpetrators. My client called the priest." According to Slader, the priest not only admitted the allegation, but also "bragged about it" and about how many other children he had abused, describing a cover-up of reported incidents.

Slader soon issued a press release that he was filing a lawsuit against the Archdiocese of Portland over the allegations. "After that, I was getting calls almost constantly from crying men or their wives" who stated they had been abused by that same priest or other priests. A handful of other lawyers also began taking the cases, and Slader estimates that he eventually represented at least 40 abuse victims, mostly men then around his own age.

"In many cases, I was the first person to whom they had ever disclosed the abuse," he says. "In my mind's eye, I kept seeing in my clients the Catholic boys I grew up with. Those first sessions with clients were some of the most intense emotional experiences I have had. By the time I hung up my shingle, I was worn. Highly satisfied at the work I had done, but very worn. The work had gotten to me."

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The July 2004 opening day of the trial of one of his cases, when the Archdiocese of Portland filed for bankruptcy, proved to be a turning point. According to the *Washington Post*, the Portland diocese became the first in the nation to file for bankruptcy protection under the weight of sexual abuse lawsuits, which had cost it more than \$53 million in claims. The paper reported that at that point, 196 people had filed allegations against 41 Portland priests, dating back to 1950. "The final resolution of the bankruptcy was the signal to close my practice," says Slader. The process to do that was gradual, though, and he had to tie up many loose ends before he transferred his bar membership to inactive status in 2008.

Healing Himself

He soon turned his attention back to his childhood passion for art. "When I gave up art as my life's goal, I gave it up entirely," he says. He decided to do his legal career "full bore." Except for taking up photography in college, he completely dropped art. By that point he had made the decision "that if I wasn't going to make a living at it, I would not do it at all. I am an all-or-nothing type of guy."

When he focused on his legal career from then on, he was never able to develop outside interests to achieve what felt like a balanced life. But as soon as he retired, he began taking art classes from local artist Phil Sylvester. The paintings Slader began doing were, like Sylvester's, focused intensely on the human face and drew from their own deeply personal experiences.

"When I retired, I was sick, rebelling from all the stress I had been through" in his practice, Slader says. With Sylvester's help, he was able to express what he was feeling. "I have, somewhat, worked through that experience through my art." For the first several years, he painted portraits of serious-looking, intense, stubborn men. Barbara, his wife, was convinced that he was painting his clients. "At some point, I realized it," he says. The paintings used bold, abstract color to portray "tenacious survivors. My clients developed a certain toughness about them to get through life."

More recently, he has done a series of defiant female nudes, "which I came to realize were a response to the current po-

litical environment,” he says. His work is raw in color and texture, and he says the paintings “reflect an identification with people who have toughened through life and reached a state of calm confidence.”

Slader’s art studio is a cabin on 6 acres he owns near Vernonia, alongside the Nehalem River. He is a member of, and handles business and marketing for, Gallery 114, an artists’ collective in Portland’s Pearl District. An exhibit of his paintings at the gallery will open with a public reception on a First Thursday, July 6. Collective member Joanie Krug says Slader brings “a strong personality” and creative ideas, and he is “very passionate about supporting the gallery.”

Art collector Shelia Orwoll says she was “immediately smitten” by Slader’s paintings when she and her husband bought their first work by Slader. Even though the couple had made the decision to purchase only one painting from any single artist, they were unable to keep that commitment in Slader’s case.

“He had a few very large and wonderful paintings that continued to live in my mind long after the show,” she says. “I’ve told David that I cannot attend more openings because I always meet a painting I cannot seem to live without. But, more than a painting, it seems I meet a person I cannot live without. David’s paintings are vivid — the faces evoke something that makes me wonder what the person must be thinking. I never tire of having them in my home. Maybe the paintings are so intriguing because they come from such an interesting man.”

Retired Oregon trial attorney Mickey Morey also uses the term “passionate” to describe Slader. “He was without question a terrific lawyer,” says Morey, who also specialized in representing victims of sexual abuse and often collaborated with Slader. “He has always been passionate about his family and friends. He was passionate about the practice of law and the men and women he represented. And now through his paintings, with the blending of so many distinct colors and the multitude of emotional facial expressions, he expresses great passion in his art.”

Morey says Slader handled the majority of the first large group of cases in Oregon against the priest who had ac-

cumulated the most accusations. “David not only did a superb job on behalf of all those clients, but he was the one who was instrumental in exposing the reality of the extent of sexual abuse that had gone on for decades in Oregon, particularly in the Portland Archdiocese. And for that, David should be given tremendous credit, as it allowed so many victims of abuse to garner the courage to break the silence and come forward and to no longer be shamed by what happened to them as children.”

Morey points out that Slader also founded an organization dedicated solely to assisting survivors of abuse: Oregon Abuse Survivors And Advocates. It serves as a resource and advocate for abuse survivors, offering counseling and support groups. “David was the moving force and fundraiser, and provided funding himself, for OASA. It is just one more example of his passion and commitment to helping others.”

Slader calls the memories of his final years practicing law as “a mixture of exhilaration, satisfaction and grief. For many of my clients, a dose of justice gave them their lives back. For some others, it was just too little, too late to matter. Some have done well since, some have not. A few didn’t even survive the duration of the litigation. I saw many damaged men and heard many parents’ and siblings’ stories about those who took their lives young.”

Slader says he is grateful for both the career he had in law and the opportunity to return to his original creative impulses.

“The opportunity to get some justice for these victims was the most satisfying thing I had done in my career,” he reflects. “Having done it, I felt I had freed myself to go back to art. I had done my little bit to help heal the world; now I could go back to my first love, art. It was liberating. To have the blessing to have done something worth doing and make a living, and then to live long enough to go back to doing what I wanted to do. So I feel very blessed.”

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