





# a colorful journey

BY NIKKI ROWELL

*If a picture is worth a thousand words, then Tommy and Cissy Prewitts' artwork could easily tell the story of their life together, each brushstroke detailing the years of love, growth, laughter and hard times.*

**T**he Prewitts have learned to tackle the good and bad times together, pens and paintbrushes in hand. The couple first met in fourth grade at First Pres. Their last names, Prewitt and Primos, meant they sat next to each other in class.

"He sat in front of me in the fourth grade," Cissy said. "From fourth grade all the way through – I mean, at Prep his locker was even above mine – we were always together."

"His dad saw me when I was two years old walking out of church one day and jokingly said, 'I claim you for my daughter-in-law,'" she added with a laugh. "So, we've always kind of been stuck together."

They remained best friends from First Pres to Jackson Prep to Ole Miss and dated off and on over the years.

It was not until Tommy finished school at the University of Mississippi Medical School and started his residency in general surgery that they decided to give dating another shot. Two weeks later, they were engaged.

Within two weeks, 150 of their family members and friends gathered as the couple exchanged their vows.

"We pulled it together in two weeks," she said.

"It was different, and it was fun," he added about the wedding.

The couple have made the Jackson metro their home and together have three children.

In November 2015, Tommy, then 54, was diagnosed with early onset dementia.

"I had begun seeing signs in the spring," Cissy said.

He wasn't practicing surgery at the time. Then, he was working

as a health policy advisor to the chancellor. Cissy was taking care of her mother, who has Alzheimer's, and taking her to the MIND Center.

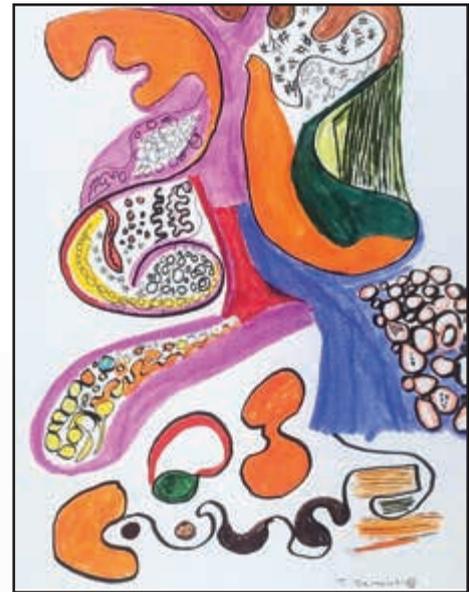
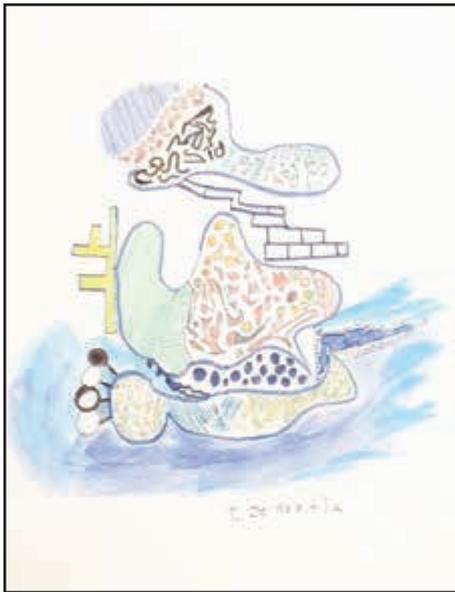
"I couldn't go one day for her appointment, so I asked Tommy to take her," she said. "When you go to the MIND Center and see your doctor, you do a cognitive test. It's a standardized test they do every time to judge where you are."

"Tommy told the doctor, 'I think I need to come see you, I can't answer any of these questions,'" Cissy added.

They decided to make an appointment, and the doctor suspected he had a form of dementia.

"His started off with speech, with not being able to come up with the right words," she said. "He would put on seminars, and he was a speaker. Then, all of a

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sudden, he was having trouble coming up with words and speaking.”

It took two years to get an official diagnosis.

They were living in Madison then and decided to make the move back to Jackson to be closer to family and friends.

“It’s funny because we have the same friends now that we had then, so many of them,” she said. “Since Tommy has gotten sick, besides his art, it’s our friends that have made all the difference in the world. It’s brought us all together.”

One of the toughest parts of navigating their new lives after the diagnosis for Tommy has been adjusting to no longer working after years in the medical field as a breast surgical oncologist, an educator and health policy advisor.

“He didn’t feel like he had any purpose,” Cissy said. “I went back to work to work as a pre-school teacher at First Pres. One day, before I left for work, he was just sitting here, and I said, ‘Here’s some paper and here’s some paint. When I get back, I want to see what you’ve done.’”

Tommy has often drawn doodles, but Cissy said it was the first time he attempted to paint.

“It was life-changing for him,” she added.

Now, he starts each day with the goal of completing three new pieces of artwork. His style is fun and colorful, much like his personality, and watercolor is his medium of choice.



*Top photos are Dr. and Mrs. Tommy Prewitt at their wedding following their two-week engagement.*

*Left: Tommy with their three children Dixon, Grace and Gwynn.*

There have been more limits placed on Tommy in recent years due to his disease. He is unable to drive or work and still has a bit of trouble with his speech.

Through all the difficult times that come with the disease, Cissy said Tommy has never complained as they have worked to establish their new normal in their day-to-day lives.

"He has never complained that he can't work. He has never complained that he can't drive," she said.

However, on the page, there are no limits. He is free to take chances with color and shapes and bring his ideas to life in the four by eight-inch pieces of paper he uses.

Each piece is signed with the name T. Dementia, a nod to the disease that brought him to this hobby in the first place.

On the back, Cissy writes out a name of her own creation for each of the paintings. Tommy jokes that he would name them all some variation of "Bob" if not for her.

Cissy shows her artwork at Brown's, and this February she showed Tommy's work at the Valentine's Day show.

“And he sold out,” Cissy said. “It was great. That started his art career.”

“It keeps me going,” Tommy said of his artwork.

He starts off by drawing his shapes out with a pen in black ink, then he adds color with watercolor paints. His work is sold at Brown’s and View Gallery.

Cissy, who is known for her paintings of dancers, begins her works with layers and layers of acrylic paint to add texture and color, then she uses oil sticks to complete the works.

“Then I add marks and lighten it out until a figure takes shape,” she said of her mixed media pieces.

On October 17, they will host a fundraiser “A Night with Beautiful Minds: A celebration of visual, culinary and musical arts” benefitting the MIND Center.

The event, which will be held at the Old Capitol Inn at 6 p.m., will highlight Tommy’s love of art by featuring visual, culinary, musical and performing artists.

Featured artists include William Dunlap, Pryor Lampton, Ellen Langford, Robert St. John and Wyatt Waters.



*The Prewitts with their fourth-grade class at First Presbyterian Day School.*



*Friends since First Pres and Jackson Prep from left are Tommy, Kendal Garraway, Lyons Brewer, Kirk Hines and Worth DuPerier.*



*Childhood friends who still get together often. From left are Sarah and Phil Buffington, Polly and Bo Bourne, Cissy and Tommy, Jimmy and Susan Nix and Howard and Evelyn Randolph.*