

ART

Dropping Anchor at Columbia

Printer sets up shop at college

By Jeff Huebner
Special to the Tribune

Last fall, David Jones got a once-in-a-lifetime job offer, a potential career move that many Chicago arts administrators might have made in a New York minute. But Jones — an artist, teacher and master printer, with deep roots in the city's cultural community — was faced with a dilemma.

In this case, the founder and executive director of the 16-year-old Anchor Graphics would move to Manhattan permanently, to run the famed Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop. Jones had worked there the previous six months as a consultant, while struggling to keep his own fine-art printshop afloat. Blackburn had been one of Jones' mentors, though the pioneering, Harlem-born artist's death in 2003 left his 55-year-old cooperative press in disarray. Jones had been hired to help reorganize it.

Now its caretakers wanted a commitment. "So, I could take this directorship to New York," says Jones, 56, "or I could walk away from Anchor Graphics."

When Jack Lemon's Landfall Press decamped from Chicago to Santa Fe in 2004, it left behind a storied 34-year national legacy — and Anchor as perhaps the area's most visible and versatile not-for-profit printer and publisher of limited-edition works, created by artists using techniques such as lithography, woodcut, etching and photo-based processes.

Filling a void

Since opening in a small Ukrainian Village storefront in 1969 and later moving to River North, Jones — who got his start in Chicago as a printer at Landfall — built Anchor into what he calls "a professional shop and a community shop." Here, printmakers and other artists could rent press time, drop by during open studio hours or conduct residencies. They could exhibit their work in its gallery.

Anchor has also been civic-minded. It has offered free printmaking opportunities to local youths, and maintained a schedule of classes, lectures, school workshops and public programs, all designed to demystify a technical art medium. "The history of prints — the idea of multiples — is a democratic process," Jones says. "You can whip them out quickly, and they're more affordable. You can reach a broader range of the populace."

"[Anchor's reputation] has to do with the vision of David Jones and the way he works with people and his balancing act between education and collaborative printmaking," says print scholar David Mickenberg, executive director of the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College, and former director of the Hock Museum of Art at Northwestern University. "His value is in both areas. He's produced some extraordinary prints by contemporary artists."

Over the years, Jones and his staff — including master printer Chris Flynn — have worked with local and national artists such as Dale Chihuly, Michiko Itatani, Ellen Lanyon, Kerry James Marshall, Audrey Niffenegger, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Karl Wirsam and the late Ed Paschke and Hollis Sigler as well as scores of emerging artists exploring the medium.

"David is real giving — he helped me get my shop going," says artist Teresa James, a former master printer at Tony Fitzpatrick's Big Cat Press who also did work at Anchor before starting White Wings Press three years ago. "Printmaking is a small part of the art world here, and you've got to support each other."

Hard work, not romanticism

Jones found working with artists to be "one of the most exciting" things about his job. "What I've come to understand about printmaking is that the prints are the residue of the experience," he says. "You go through all this interaction and dance and you get to know people. Artists shouldn't have to be burdened with the technical skills. What we try to do is get them to be comfortable enough to take the risks to create good work."

But, he adds, "It's not a romantic process. It's hard work." Jones would know about that: He has been around. A native of the Bay Area, he studied photography and lithography at institutions in Louisville, in Banff and Vancouver, Canada, and at the University of Missouri before earning a bachelor's degree

in printmaking from the Kansas City Art Institute in 1987. He was 37. (At one point, he says he lived in Canada as an "illegal alien" to study under noted printmaker Robert Evermon.)

It was an internship — and later a production job — at Landfall Press that first brought Jones to Chicago, in 1986 (he and his wife, artist Marilyn Propp, moved here for good a year later). "I wasn't happy with my own work, and felt more satisfied working with other artists," says Jones, adding that, after a while, "it was like factory work. I thought I'd be there forever, but at some point I knew I needed to leave."

Jones established Anchor Graphics at 633 N. Damen Ave. in 1989, and when the thriving printshop outgrew its facilities, he moved it to a 3,600-square-foot, 5th-floor loft at 113 W. Hubbard St. a decade ago, adding a gallery and more programs and staffers. As Anchor gained a national profile, Jones lectured around the country, taught at local colleges and arts organizations, and exhibited his own photo-based prints.

Several years ago, Jones felt Anchor "needed to change." He was getting burned out — and not just by cranking litho presses. Operational costs were up, and while funding was about the same. "we seemed to be working harder but not able to grow," says Jones, who could

never pay himself a lot.

So Jones says he "started conversations" with administrators at Columbia College Chicago (among other places) about the possibility of housing Anchor. The college was interested, but talks moved slowly. In the meantime, he interviewed for the job heading the Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, and — to his surprise — got it.

But Jones had to explain to Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts staffers, who ran the facility, that his Chicago shop was "in transition" — it might or might not go on without him. The foundation agreed to hire Jones as a consultant and, starting in spring 2005, he helped get the New York workshop's presses and programs rolling again. (Luckily, he says, Anchor was "pretty quiet" and it kept afloat by not having to pay him.)

Opting for home

Last September, New York offered Jones the director job. He conferred with Columbia officials, including Leonard Lehrer, dean of the School of Fine and Performing Arts, but now they needed a commitment too. "It was truly an honor David was offered that," Lehrer says. "But he had to determine that [Columbia] would more fully develop his potential."

"I think I created something worthwhile," Jones says of Anchor. "I didn't want to kill it."

In the end, Columbia made an offer, and Jones chose home. In February, Anchor joined a growing lineup of local arts organizations — including DanceAfrica Chicago and the Chicago Jazz Ensemble — that have come under the college's purview in recent years.

Students come to the school to "work with heavy-duty professionals in a very intensive cultural environment," remarks Lehrer, himself a widely exhibited printmaker.

In April, Jones and staffers began moving years of accumulated materials — two litho presses, an etching press, non-toxic inks and solvents, tables, plates, stones, copiers, archives — into Anchor's new berth on the second floor of 623 S. Wabash Ave. It's smaller than the Hubbard space, and there's no room for a gallery (at least yet), but Jones proudly shows off new amenities such as a state-of-the-art ventilation system, a safety measure.

Anchor's core mission won't change. "They want us to be who we are," he maintains. It's still a non-profit, offering access to artists and hosting classes and workshops for high school students and anyone else who's interested. Though Anchor still has to raise funds, the organization has some financial stability — and Jones has a staff job.

But he's got big ideas, and is upbeat about the possibilities of

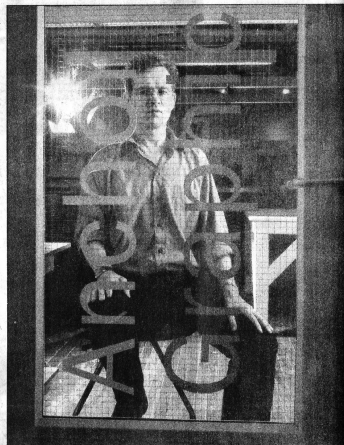


Photo for the Tribune by Anthony Robert La Penna
David Jones, founder and executive director of Anchor Graphics, turned down an offer to move to Manhattan. He has instead relocated his printmaking business to Columbia College.

working on projects with the college's other art and design disciplines, such as on limited-edition bookmaking.

"There's an incredible network of resources we can tap into to push the organization forward," Jones says. "Printmak-

ing is such a great tool because we can bring in all this wonderful technology. We can bring artists to Chicago and take our artists out of the state. It's an opportunity to become an advocate for the arts in Chicago." ctc-arts@tribune.com