

FEATURING ONE OF OUR OWN

Sumter's Michael Duffy Selected as the
2019 Sumter Iris Festival Featured Artist

For a lot of people, Memorial Day Weekend marks the unofficial beginning of Summer. It's safe to don white pants, dust off the grill, and brave the sandy shores of our neighboring lakes. But for many Sumterites and thousands of visitors from around the country, Memorial Day Weekend means one thing — the Iris Festival.

And this year, hidden among the thousands of Japanese Irises lining Swan Lake's shores, the aromas drifting from food vendors serving up the best in festival cuisine, the music from our various stages, and myriad vendors delivering handmade goods and fun souvenirs, you'll find our featured artist — local artist, actor, and producer, Michael Duffy. We sat down with Michael to learn a little about where he comes from, what he loves and what it means to him to be this year's Featured Artist at the 79th Annual Sumter Iris Festival. Here's what he had to say:

Tell us a little about yourself.

I am an Air Force brat. My family moved to Shaw AFB in the late fifties and I grew up in the High Hills of the Santee, wandering the woods and fields between Stateburg and Dalzell. I am a product of Sumter School District having entered Shaw Heights Elementary in 1959 and graduating from Hillcrest in 1972, and I have spent the last twenty-eight years teaching and serving as a Library Media Specialist in Sumter schools. I will retire from teaching in June of this year.

My obsession with art began when I was very young. I have always loved drawing and building things. In elementary school my teachers were constantly interrupting my furious sketching with math, social studies, and reading. My friends and I spent our summers building forts and digging in the rich, red clay banks to make sun-dried sculptures to leave along the sandy country backroads. In a social studies class in third grade I first learned about the beautiful artistry of Native American potters and I immediately set out to find sources of the kaolin clay that made their work so rich. And I succeeded.

Deep in the old growth woods that have since given way to trailer parks and subdivisions, I discovered several thick veins of near pure white and purple clay. I spent hours digging, drying, sifting and kneading the slick and sticky stuff into free-form pots and tiny totems. I was less successful at the kind of primitive wood firing that gave the native pottery its power and permanence.

Eventually my family moved out of the High Hills and settled closer to town but my need to create was not stymied. It was re-directed. I began carving wood, making walking sticks from cedar and garden gnomes from cypress knees gleaned from road construction sites. I also began working in plaster and produced a series of sculptures built on metal armatures.

Do you have a specific style or medium?

In recent years I have focused almost exclusively on concrete sculpture. Its permanence appeals to me. It is a difficult medium and raises constant challenges, but the results are exceedingly satisfying. While so much of art is ephemeral in nature, I like to think that many of my pieces will reside in the gardens and yards of Sumter for many years after I am gone.

Where do you draw your inspiration?

I enjoy art of all kinds and draw inspiration from many sources. I have had the great good fortune to visit a number of the greatest





galleries in the world and have stood in the presence of Michelangelo, Picasso, Van Gogh, Dali, and many, many others. I am deeply enthralled by the ancient monolithic art of prehistory and the continuing story of humanity's search for meaning through the act of creation. Art connects us all to our past and, hopefully, speaks to future generations about who we are.

What does it mean to you to be our featured artist?

I am humbled and sincerely grateful to have been chosen as the featured artist for this year's Iris Festival. Swan Lake Iris Gardens have featured prominently in so many important events in my life. Like so many long-time Sumter residents, I have walked these grounds more times than I can count. I have attended weddings, christenings, and memorials here stretching back through decades. This is a magical and magnetic place filled with moments and memories too numerous to count. What finer honor can an artist achieve than to share their work here?

What do you love most about Sumter?

I have watched Sumter grow and change for almost seven decades. From a sleepy southern town we have grown to be an eclectic and dynamic town. Shaw Air Force Base and the many industries that have added their unique cultures to ours have created a place that is full of potential and possibility. The arts community has been a hugely important part of the growth and expanding culture we

enjoy today. Whether it is dance, sports, art, music, food, or quiet walks in the woods, it is all right here, close to home and heart. Close to Sumter.

When you're not creating, how do you like to spend your free time?

My free time is spent always in the presence of my soul mate, my wonderful wife, Carmela (the most excellent Italian cook in Sumter). We are both heavily involved with the Sumter Little Theatre and with the arts community in general. We enjoy meeting new people and entertaining at our home and we travel as often as we can, usually starting from her family home in Naples, Italy. We look forward to spending many more years doing all of these things.

We're so excited to feature Michael at the gardens this year, and we hope you'll join us as we celebrate many of the things we think make Sumter beautiful — from art and food to music and dance, the Sumter Iris Festival has been bringing the best of Sumter to the forefront for nearly 80 years. Find Michael, and more, this Memorial Day weekend. For more information, visit IrisFestival.org.

IrisFestival.org


Iris Festival

