

Herman's creator comes home

'Two-bit' artist draws a fortune

By JOHN STEWART

For someone who couldn't draw, Jim Unger has gone a long, long way.

"I was good at layout, but I couldn't draw," recalled the creator of the famous "Herman" cartoon character, now published in daily newspapers around the world. He was reminiscing about his early days as a staff artist at The Mississauga Times on a recent return to the city to promote Herman, The Third Treasury.

Old friends and employees of The Times found Unger hasn't changed a bit — except that his hair is considerably longer.

"I used to hate it when Wilf would come in and say 'draw a car,'" Unger said in reference to former Times, now News advertising salesman, Wilf Wiber. "I told him I couldn't draw a car."

After several months in the job, Unger was pressured to start drawing political cartoons. The first one he attempted, recalls News editor Mike Toth, was drawn and redrawn and redrawn until Unger thought it was good enough for print. Then it was altered again as the London, England native sought critical opinion from the rest of the staff.

Even after he won the award three years running as the best cartoonist in the province from the Ontario Weekly Newspaper Association, Unger wasn't all that confident about his skills.



Jim Unger has fans of all ages. Five-year-old Patricia Slaven went to see the creator of "Herman" when he returned recently to Mississauga, where he started his career as a cartoonist with The Mississauga Times.

(Staff photo by Rob Beintema)

He had to be talked into sending his work away to American syndicates by Times reporters, especially Frank Touby. "I owe him a lot," remarked Unger recalling how Universal Press Syndicate replied to the mailing with a 10-year contract which launched his career.

By contrast, the Toronto Star turned down his work, indicating they weren't particularly interested in Canadian artists.

Unger's face lit up as his colleagues recalled some of their favorite cartoons from his Mississauga days.

He swapped favorites with his former colleagues as old friends trade treasured stories.

Some recalled his cartoons about the Gordon Dr. barrier controversy, which involved Unger's former neighbor and long-time friend David Culham, the city's Ward 6 councillor.

Mike Toth recalled a cartoon in a special Christmas supplement in which an apartment tenant watched as Santa Claus stepped from his balcony into a pot holding the tenant's tree. "Get off my land!" the man ordered Santa.

Unger recalled an early effort in which a man was leading a horse pulling a cart. As his wife picked up a bucket and shovel he advised her "don't forget the anti-pollution device."

Then there was Unger's vision of how the Southdown Rd.-Erin Mills Pkwy. traffic circle was created. The cartoonist had a design engineer lifting his coffee cup from the spot where he'd accidentally placed it — right at the intersection with the Queen Elizabeth Way. The caption had the designer saying he thought the accidental design could still be used.

After The Times printed one of Unger's rare truly political efforts, which showed MPP Douglas Kennedy as a Jack-in-the-Box for the Tory party, the editor received a phone call complaining about the "two-bit artist."

"That seems like another lifetime," remarked Unger, an independently wealthy man who now lives in the Bahamas — for tax reasons — within "staggering distance of the Playboy Club."

"I'm as surprised as anyone by my success," he commented before being dragged off to yet another book-signing promotion.

"It just shows you that the potential is in all of us," he said. "You're as good as anyone else. Whether or not you get the acclaim, you're still the same person and you're still just as good."

Jim Unger is still the same person, only now he can draw a little bit.