



## His longhorn painting will adorn CCS gym

**By Russ Pankonin**

***The Imperial Republican***

Armando Villarreal always dreamed of being an artist. He began honing his talents as a CCHS art student and has turned those dreams into reality as one of the leading sports artists in the country.

This week, Villarreal is giving something back to his school by painting a new longhorn logo on the CCS gym floor.

After 20 years, the gym floor is undergoing a face lift. It's been sanded down to bare wood and new lines are being painted. But the focus of the new floor will be Villarreal's longhorn.

It will fill the entire center circle with horns extending out more than eight feet on either side of the circle.

He began work on the art piece Monday night. With the assistance of Sabrina Hayes, his cousin and godchild, they laid out the design and painted the background.

Tuesday, he brushed the first strokes and worked into the early morning Wednesday. He hoped to complete the work Wednesday evening.

### **Specialty is airbrush**

As his talents have evolved, Villarreal has concentrated on using the airbrush as his painting tool of choice.

Three years ago, Villarreal answered an ad on Facebook seeking artists. He was one of 700 who applied. Then he was in the top 25. Then the top 14 and then among the top four who got hired by Victory Fine Art in Chicago.

Victory Fine Art specializes in one-of-a-kind original sports art.

Since joining the firm, Villarreal has become one of their top artists. Les Steinberg, owner of Victory Fine Art (VFA), said Villarreal is a "brilliant artist."

"He will become the sports artist of this era," Steinberg predicted. "He does something no one else can."

He said Villarreal's originals will sell from \$10,000 to \$25,000 depending on the size.

After Villarreal finishes the longhorn in the gym, he'll resume painting a picture of famed Yankee, Derek Jeter. Steinberg said Villarreal's work will hang in Yankee Stadium in two weeks.

Villarreal has painted sports stars from MLB, the NFL, NBA and NHL.

He has an original in the home of Mohammad Ali. In addition, CEOs of the MGM Grand in Las Vegas and Clearwire own originals of his work.



"It's starting to feel like I've made it," Villarreal said.

He always wanted to paint Michael Jordan. He said he grew up painting Jordan as his inspiration.

The potential now exists that this dream will come true also.

VFA is in negotiations with the company that owns the rights to Michael Jordan's images.

If successful, Villarreal will paint the originals and get to meet Jordan.

Villarreal's next dream job would be getting to paint images of the Dallas Cowboys, a team he loves.

### **Road to stardom not easy**

The best thing about working for VFA, Villarreal said, is a regular pay check.

But that wasn't always the case.

Villarreal's established himself as a credible artist with his wildlife art, winning the Nebraska Habitat Stamp art contest five times, the first coming in 1999.

The picture, "Southside Turkeys," was a painting of turkeys on the south side of Enders Lake. He painted them from a photo he took.

That first painting helped send him to college.

Local gun collector Rod Fuller asked Villarreal if he could buy the original of the stamp, which was only about 5" by 7".

He wouldn't let go of the original but did agree to paint a larger original of the scene for Fuller, which he bought.

Fuller still has that original, which has likely increased in value.

As a member of the National Guard, Villarreal did tours in Kosovo in 2000 and Iraq in 2003.

He and his wife, Lora, married in 2005, the last year he won the habitat stamp contest.

Villarreal said the wildlife market was flooded with artists at the time so he decided to look for his own niche where he could make money.

Initially, that turned out to be in Florida, painting show motorcycles in 2008. However, three months after they moved there, the recession hit and the business he was working for closed.

A friend knew of a similar job in California so they decided to head there.

He recalls selling his pickup to get enough gas money to drive out there. They sold a lot of possessions and filled their Ford Mustang with eight totes and headed to California for another year.

His motorcycle art won prestigious awards at Sturgis, S.D. and a big bike show in Madera, Calif.



**Following a dream**

From there, his career path took him to VFA.

Sally Walsh, creative director for VFA, said she took almost a year to find the right young emerging sports artists she was looking for.

Walsh recalls seeing one small painting of a football player Villarreal sent her during the discovery process.

"His work showed passion and was exciting," she said. "His work took the viewer somewhere else."

Like Steinberg, Walsh said Villarreal will become the greatest sports artist of the generation. But perhaps the bigger story, she said, is about Villarreal following his dream. He knew he wanted to become a sports artist and never gave up on that dream, she said.

Villarreal said he should have quit several times. "I guess I was too dumb to quit," he said. Getting to paint for a living is all he's ever wanted, he said.

Walsh gave a great deal of credit to Villarreal's high school art teacher, Dick Haneline, who recognized Villarreal's talent and encouraged him.

"It's a great life story. Imperial should be proud," she noted.

Haneline, who now teaches art at Mid-Plains Community College in North Platte, keeps in touch regularly as Villarreal's friend and mentor.

Haneline said Villarreal had all the tools and would have always been great without the teacher's help. He said it's rewarding to spur on a student to greatness.

Thanks to Villarreal, another Imperial man uses the art talents Haneline nurtured at VFA.

Walsh was looking for a pencil artist and asked Villarreal if he knew anyone. He knew that Imperial native Britt Kuenning was really good with the pencil and suggested she contact him.

Kuenning, who now lives in North Platte, works on a part-time basis for VFA. Walsh said Kuenning is also an amazing talent who "paints with a graphite pencil."

As an educator, Haneline said it's always been his job to make kids believe in themselves and urge them to follow their dreams.

"It's great to see others who have pursued their dreams and become successful," he said.

"They've made my career."

To see more about Villarreal and Kuenning, visit VFA's web site at [victoryfineart.com](http://victoryfineart.com).