

'Welcome' sign paying off for its designer half-century later

It beckoned millions of tourists

By KRISTEN PETERSON, *Las Vegas Sun*

Almost 50 years after she designed the diamond-shaped icon, Betty Willis finally is making a little extra cash off the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign.

On Friday afternoon upstairs at the S2 Art downtown offices, Willis signed limited edition prints of a photograph of the landmark standing in the foreground of an ever-expanding Strip.

"I'm happy that I'm getting paid for this," the 85-year-old Willis said. "It's at a time when we need it."

Her signature on the prints brings her the first check for the design she's received since creating the image that was sold to Clark County by salesman Ted Rogich.

"She could have made millions over the years," says Jack Solomon, S2 Art owner and the man behind the prints, adding that the sign is one of the most famous in the world.

Willis was working at Western Neon in 1959 when she came up with the design to greet visitors driving in from Los Angeles on Highway 91. The once-remote sign has become inseparable from the glitzy stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard, particularly when it comes to marketing. Images of the sign turn up everywhere: on coffee mugs, T-shirts, playing cards, pillows, magnets, Nevada license plates, and in TV commercials and print ads.

The sign is so ingrained in Las Vegas culture and history that when members of the Nevada National Guard were stationed in Kuwait, they recreated the sign for their camp, then sent a photo to Willis. She met them at Nellis Air Force Base when they returned from active duty.

Willis often refers to it as the "little sign that could." She keeps three lighted souvenir signs at home and notices the image everywhere.

The prints, which will be available this month at Jack Gallery at the Venetian and Mandalay Bay, were made from an image taken in 1998 by photographer Bill Hannapple, who is also autographing the prints. They were printed on French rag paper using lithography and serigraphy, a process that creates a rich, velvety, three-dimensional appearance.

With a latex glove on her right hand and a dish of well-sharpened pencils before her, Willis stopped occasionally to examine the photo, pointing out other signs that were designed by friends and colleagues. It was a trip down Memory Lane

'The little sign that could' Designer's gift to Las Vegas



COURTESY PHOTO

A print of Las Vegas' famous sign, designed by Betty Willis in 1959, is one of many signed by Willis and photographer Bill Hannapple at the S2 Art gallery. Why Willis has never received royalties all these years, **Page 7**.

for the woman who designed the sign as a way to attract tourists to Las Vegas, forgoing a copyright so people wouldn't be afraid to use the image.

Hannapple, a friend of Willis' who photographs old Las Vegas signs, says that occasionally he and Willis will drive amid all the construction in Las Vegas and he'll say to her, "Betty, look at what that little sign did."

She's not shy about her accomplishment, saying to her daughter one night after watching an episode on HGTV that she, too, is a "world-famous design star." She'll occasionally sign greeting cards and messages with "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas from the infamous Betty Willis."

Willis played a huge role in other marketing efforts. She also designed the Moulin Rouge sign and hotel ads for the Flamingo, Rancho and Thunderbird.

She retired seven years ago from the silk-screen company that she and her daughter owned and is busy "tweaking" her book, "The Woman Behind the Sign," which she hopes to have published soon. The book covers her life growing up in Las Vegas and working as a designer in an industry that went on to define Las Vegas.

Willis is planning to move to Overton this summer and friends keep asking, "Well, are you going to do a 'Welcome to Overton' sign?"

It's not likely, she says with a laugh.

We can only hope that she heeds her own message when she leaves town: "Drive carefully. Come back soon."



Betty Willis autographs prints of the iconic "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign last week at a local art gallery. She refers to her creation as "the little sign that could," and keeps three replicas at home.

Kristen Peterson can be reached at 259-2317 or kristen@lasvegassun.com.