

***The Waterford Times* 16 January 2014**

Former student honors late Fran Sweeney with portrait

By COLIN A. YOUNG, Staff Writer



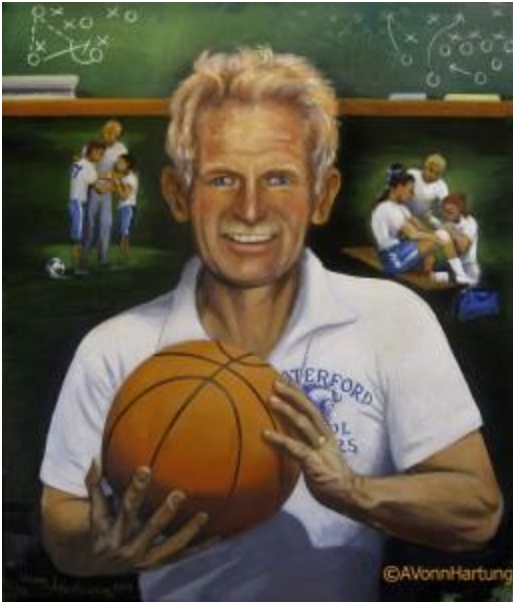
As a high school student in Waterford [Connecticut] in the late 1950's, A.Vonn Hartung had a few items ahead of sports on his list of interests: fixing up an old hot rod, chasing girls and shell-fishing, to name a few. Nonetheless, Hartung was close with Francis X. Sweeney, the school's athletic director, coach and teacher.

"You didn't have to be an athlete to be in Fran's inner circle," Hartung said. "He looked at who the person was and what their qualities were."

As its first athletic director, Sweeney, who died in December 2012 at the age of 86, was integral to the foundation and development of Waterford High's athletic department. For 18 years, he coached basketball at the school, but he coached nearly every sport at the school as well.

"Fran Sweeney has been the face of athletics in Waterford, from an education perspective, for 60 plus years," said First Selectman Daniel Steward. "He did so many different things, but he was truly the originator of the athletic program in Waterford. Every sport that came about, he would have his hand in setting it up for the school."

And on January 4, the town held a ceremony to officially name the high school's field house in honor of Sweeney. Along with a plaque, town officials unveiled a large portrait of Sweeney that will hang near the field house entrance. The portrait was painted by Hartung, who for about three decades has lived and worked in Puerto Rico.



Francis X Sweeney, "[TeacherMentorFriend](#)" Oil portrait

"The idea of painting a portrait was planted in my mind maybe even before I thought about naming the field house for him," Hartung said. "He was such a good friend and it was something that I could do despite me being so far away."

The portrait, painted with oils on canvas, shows Sweeney in the foreground holding a basketball, as if he were inviting the viewer to join him to shoot some hoops.

"When I started, I closed my eyes and thought of Fran in his fullest. The essence of Fran Sweeney was that he wanted to play ball and he wanted you to play ball with him," Hartung said. "He wanted people to learn, to have fun and to feel good in their own bodies."

Sweeney is actually represented three times in the portrait. Once as the primary focus of the painting and twice in the background. Over each of Sweeney's shoulders, Hartung painted small vignettes of the coach and mentor. On one side, Sweeney is helping two students work out a difference. On the other, he is shown in another of his many jobs: athletic trainer.

"On the left side you will see that he was a peacemaker," Hartung said. "As a teacher, as a coach and as a friend, he facilitated people getting to know each other and feeling good about each other."

And in the background is a chalk board displaying diagrams of two plays, like a coach would draw up before a game.

"I wanted to put something on the blackboard to show his intelligence as well as his heart," Hartung said. "Maybe not the theory of relativity, but maybe a diagram of how to get through the center or how to make an end run."

Though he expects the portrait of Sweeney to hang in the high school for many years, Hartung said he would like to see Sweeney's legacy continue in another way too: a scholarship fund.



Sweeney Family unveils portrait of Francis X Sweeney by

AVonnHartung, Photo by Peter Bendfeldt

Since Waterford's 1801 incorporation, there had been a moratorium on naming buildings for people. But in September, the Board of Education changed its policy regarding the naming of facilities. [And on October 29 it unanimously approved the name for the field house.](#)

"Now, 213 years later, they have changed the policy and the town has assumed a personality," Hartung said. "And there is no better personality to choose than Francis X. Sweeney."

Hartung, along with other Waterford High School alumni, [used Facebook to circulate a petition and to share memories of Sweeney.](#)

"It was like a tsunami," Hartung said of the outpouring of support for the proposal to name the field house for Sweeney. "It took on a life of its own."

Through the process, Hartung said, he was able to reconnect with old classmates, other high school alumni and Sweeney's family.

"Communicating with all these people, most of them much younger than me, that's what would have excited Fran the most," he said, "that we were all connecting and working together."

[See video tribute to Francis X Sweeney](#)