

Artist Gregory Kondos was raised in East Sacramento He was inspired to seek career as a painter during WWII

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By LANCE ARMSTRONG

Editor's Note: This is part one of a two-part series on Sacramento artist Gregory Kondos.

Among the notable people who have called East Sacramento their home is the world- renowned California landscape artist Gregory Kondos.

While meeting with the East Sacramento News last week, Kondos, 96, spoke about growing up in this area and other memories of his life.

Kondos said that although he was not born in Sacramento, he has lived in this city for nearly every year of his life.

“I was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, and we left there (in about 1927), and came to Sacramento,” he said. “The reason for that (move) was the climate.”

Kondos noted his father, Steve, found work as a barber, and his mother, Kanela, eventually became a cannery worker for the Bercut-Richards Packing Plant, which opened on North 7th Street, near today's Richards Boulevard, in 1932.

Steve and Kanela, who were both immigrants from Greece, had two other children, Olympia and George. The first Sacramento home of the Kondos family was located at 524 10th St.

By the following year, the family was living at 324 34th St., near McKinley Park, in East Sacramento. Kondos, who enjoyed the typical offerings of McKinley Park, said that his favorite memory of the park pertains to his mother.



Photo by Lance Armstrong

Gregory Kondos, a world-renowned Sacramento artist sits inside his home on Sept. 27.

“The Greeks were average people, poor, and my (family) for Thanksgiving, they would celebrate Thanksgiving somehow,” he said. “They bought a baby turkey and raised it in the backyard, and my mother had it tied to a string. And here, this turkey got big, and it made a tug and it broke the string, and then it flew over the roof of the house into the panhandle of McKinley Park.

“My mother spotted where it landed, so she ran back home, got in the closet, got my father’s 12-gauge shotgun and went to the park and shot the turkey out of (a) tree. She carried it home (by its) two legs, and we had Thanksgiving.”

Kondos added that his family also enjoyed chicken dinners at home with chickens that his parents purchased in Sacramento’s Chinatown.

“They would go down to (downtown) Sacramento and buy the chickens from the Chinese down there, and (workers) would chop off the head and put the chicken in a garbage pail and let it run around in the garbage pail (until it died. This Chinese market) was across from the (Southern Pacific) depot, right in that area. It was the chicken, poultry area for Sacramento.”

Also memorable to Kondos are two deliverymen who had routes in East Sacramento.

“I was around when the iceman would come down the street,” he said. “He was a Greek (man). He would bring blocks of ice for our icebox – not a refrigerator, but an icebox. Then Mr. (Peter B.) Andrews, who lived on the corner of McKinley Park, he was the bakery man with a horse and a buggy delivering bread to all the Greek families.”

Andrews, who resided about a block away from the Kondoses at 461 34th St., was an employee of William J. Kakavas’ bakery at 1531 4th St.

Kondos also recalled how his brother would fall asleep while watching movies at the Alhambra Theatre at Alhambra Boulevard and K streets.

“He hadn’t come home yet, because (he would be) sleeping in the third row,” he said. “He was born (a) seven months baby, so they blamed everything on that.”

On Sundays, the Kondoses attended the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, when it was located at 620 N St. The current church, just west of McKinley Park, was completed in the fall of 1951.

As for his education during his childhood, Kondos attended Theodore Judah School at 39th Street and McKinley Boulevard, and Sutter Junior High School at 18th and K streets.

While at Sutter Junior High, Kondos earned a Golden Key for excellence in art.

Asked to comment on his Golden Key, Kondos did not place much significance in that award, and he added that he no longer knows the whereabouts of the award.

In June 1941, Kondos graduated from Sacramento High School at 34th Street and Broadway.

Less than six months later, the United States declared war on Japan, in response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.



Photo courtesy of Gregory Kondos

Gregory Kondos sits in a goat-drawn cart with his sister, Olympia, in about 1926. This photograph was taken in Maine, a short time before the Kondos family moved to California.

Kondos recalled how proud his father was to learn that he enlisted in the Navy.

“My father was a wounded soldier from World War I in the Argonne Forest (battle) in France, and he was very, very proud (of his service in the U.S. Army),” he said. “So, when the war broke out, I didn’t tell my dad. I went and enlisted, and then when I got home, I said, ‘By the way, Dad, I just enlisted in the Navy.’ (He responded), ‘Oh, my boy.’ He just thought that was the greatest thing. Now I’m going to war for America.”

Kondos mentioned that it was during his service in the war when he became serious about art.

“When we would shoot the enemy, like shoot a plane down, I would put the flag up, paint it on the bridge,” he said. “Then the skipper says, ‘I want you to do my portrait.’ I said, ‘Why? I’m not an artist.’

“He said, ‘Well, I saw some of your sketches and I liked them. So, you can use my quarters, but I can’t model for you for a long period.’”

Fellow sailors also asked Kondos to sketch drawings for them.

Kondos also recalled being inspired by a Life magazine artist who he viewed painting during the war.

“This guy came on board with a canvas stool and a paint box, and he opened it up on the flight deck and started painting the sailors running around,” he said. “Well, that’s not bad. I knew I could sketch, but it didn’t mean art to me. It was just getting extra doughnuts.”

Following the war, Kondos’ father asked him what he planned to do next in his life.

Kondos said that his father was surprised by his answer.

“I’m going to go to art school,” he replied.

Utilizing the GI Bill and maintaining a budget-strict diet that consisted of many bologna and mayonnaise sandwiches, Kondos attended Los Angeles’ Art Center School (today’s Art Center College of Design, in Pasadena), in 1947.

He returned to his hometown a year later to continue his studies in art at Sacramento State College – today’s California State University, Sacramento. It was at that institution where he also met Wayne Thiebaud, who would also bring artistic notoriety to the capital city through his art.

Kondos said that before his years of earning a living through his art, he worked a variety of jobs.

“I did go to work, selling clothes, selling shoes, and I did cannery work (at Bercut-Richards’ Sacramento plant),” he said. “It was the life of a peasant, and the wonderful life of a peasant. I don’t regret one minute.”