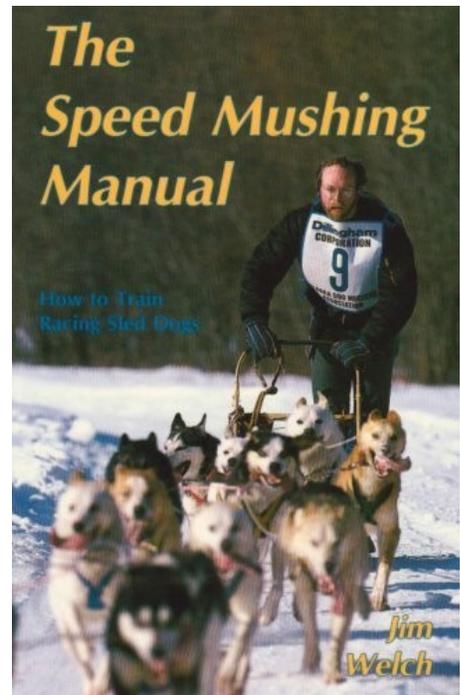


Art, life, dogs, and disability – James P. Welch

The guest artist for Homer’s first Disability Art Show is James P. Welch. As a young man, Jim studied Art at Stanford, created “eye movement art” that tracked his own eye movements across photographic paper, and had his first museum sale in 1973: “Xerox Two-Sided Shirt,” sold to the permanent collection of the San Francisco Museum of Fine Art. But in the latter half of the 1970s, pragmatism and an artist’s curiosity about perception and ways to explore 3-D space led him back to school to earn a Master’s degree in Special Education at San Francisco State University. There he learned how to teach Orientation and Mobility (O&M) to individuals with blindness or visual impairment.

A love of dog mushing nurtured by watching “Sergeant Preston of the Yukon” on TV as a boy in Rochester, New York, led Jim north to Anchorage, Alaska, for his first O&M teaching job. He taught travel and life skills and gave low vision exams for many years at what is now the Alaska Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired. During this period, Jim often visited Native villages to assess clients in their communities so that their training could be tailored to their particular needs and village. Jim also trained first a 5-dog team, then a 7-dog, and finally an Open sled dog team. During this busy time, embroidery and cross stitching gave Jim ways to unwind—and he began teaching himself mandolin.

Dogs became more and more central in Jim’s life, until he decided to become a professional sprint racer, dog breeder, and sled dealer, and bid a fond farewell to the Center for the Blind after many years as an instructor and then the director. As he competed successfully in larger and larger races, Jim decided to compile the wealth of sled dog training wisdom he’d found, starting with his talks with George Atla—the renowned “Huslia Hustler”—from whom Jim bought his first five dogs. While Jim was working on his sprint mushing manual, he also began to notice symptoms like blurred vision and balance issues that came and went without rhyme or reason. By 1989, when Jim published his well-received and now much-translated book, *The Speed Mushing Manual*, he had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, or MS. After the diagnosis, Jim had to give up dog mushing. He returned to teaching O&M while transitioning from a cane to two canes to a walker. He was able to retire before transitioning to the full-time use of a wheelchair.



From the MS diagnosis onward, pen and ink drawing—what some have called Jim’s “inkuendos”—has become increasingly important. As Jim’s hands have grown shakier, he’s incorporated into his lines tiny zigs and zags reminiscent of the way our eyes move when viewing an object—movements he tracked as a young artist in his “eye movement art.” Drawing still provides Jim a challenge, focus, distraction, and a way to ground, explore, and comment on life using colors, lines, words, wit, and wisdom. Several pieces in this show were first shown in 2004 at the International Contemporary Gallery of Art in Anchorage. You’ll find inkuendos to ponder in Jim’s visual/verbal reflections on life, dogs, and disability.