DRAW ME A PICTURE

PROFESSIONAL ILLUSTRATORS TED AND BETSY LEWIN ON CAMPUS
hey met in art school in the 1950s at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, N.Y. He was from Buffalo; she was from Clearfield, Pa., a small, rural town of a few thousand people about 90 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. Despite their different backgrounds, they had a strong common bond.

“Both of us had a pencil in our hands since childhood. It was kind of hit or miss before art school, but once we were there, we knew we wanted to do illustration,” says Ted Lewin, half of a renowned children’s-book illustrator-and-author team, with his wife, Betsy. Both are faculty in the limited-residency Master in Fine Arts in Illustration program at the Hartford Art School. The Lewins, who have illustrated about 200 books apiece, were on campus in July for the program’s intensive, two-week summer session.

But the path from budding artist to celebrated illustrator, author, and teacher included an unusual element.

At the age of 17, Ted Lewin was looking for summer work to help finance art school. He was about to take a job in a surplus store when fate stepped in. His older brother, Donn, had come back from World War II and was headed west to Ohio to become a professional wrestler. Ted, who had loved wrestling since childhood, became his sparring partner, and the two formed a tag team, the Lewin Brothers.

Ted’s summer job turned into a part-time job in the fall in New York City, helping to pay for art school, then providing income during the early years when he was building his portfolio and reputation. During the downtime between matches, Ted did a lot of drawings of fellow wrestlers. Eventually his experiences and some of the artwork were published in a 1993 book called *I was a Teenage Professional Wrestler*.

“In those days, I worked on canvas by day and on canvas by night,” says Ted, with a laugh.

Initially, the Lewins did various types of illustration. Betsy created artwork for greeting cards, and Ted did magazine illustration and book jackets. By the late 1960s he was illustrating children’s books and by 1976 issued *World within a World—Everglades*, the first in a three-book series he wrote and illustrated that focused on wildlife.


Their mutual love of travel led to several trips abroad, including one in 1997 to Uganda to see mountain gorillas. From that trip came the idea of their first collaboration, called *Gorilla Walk* (1999). Since then, they have done five other books together, the latest of which is *Horse Song: The Naadam of Mongolia* (2008).

Some 10 years ago, the Lewins met Murray Tinkelman, also a celebrated illustrator and the current director of the MFA in illustration program.

“We met Murray at a Society of Illustrators event in New York. We admired each other’s work. Now he thinks he’s my third brother,” says Ted. Tinkelman brought the Lewins into the program three years ago as faculty to teach an intensive, five-day class in illustrating children’s books.

“Most of the students have never done children’s books before. It’s a very different concept with different rules,” says Betsy. “The cover has to tell what the book is about without giving the story away. Inside, the pictures have to move the eye from left to right, with the main images on the right-hand page. Telling the story is a marriage of pictures and words.”

“At the end of the five days, the students have to finish a 32-page dummy of the book they are creating. Some of the dummies are rough sketches; some are almost like final artwork,” adds Ted.

The limited-residency Master of Fine Arts in Illustration is specifically designed to meet the needs of practicing illustrators who maintain active, full-time professional careers. The independent, tutorial-based program structure requires two and one-third years to complete. Students are in residence at the University for two-week, intensive summer sessions and at off-campus, one-week residencies in selected cities during the fall and spring semesters. During the nonresident portions of the program, students maintain ongoing contact with faculty members.

“The level of professionalism in the class and the dedication of the students are amazing,” says Ted. “It makes our jobs as instructors so much easier. Everything progresses very rapidly. I think we’ve had a half-dozen former students who have taken their projects from this class and sold them to publishers.”