

ARTS & IDEAS

SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2006

THE MORNING CALL

SECTION E

MINING THE TOUGH AND THE TENDER

Coal region artist Frank Wyso gave grimy dignity to hard lives

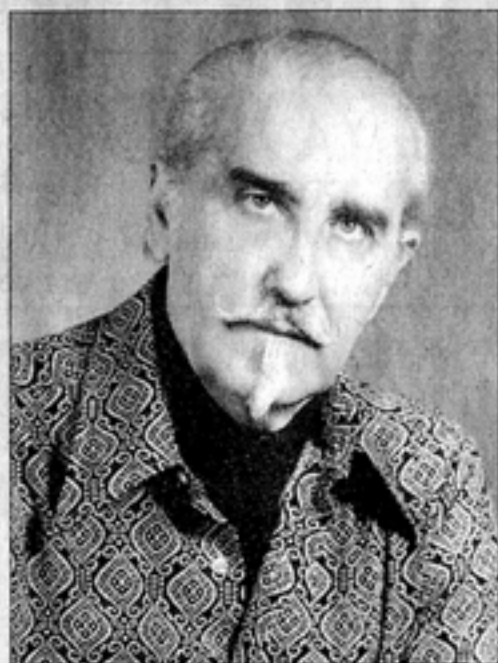
By Geoff Gehman
Of The Morning Call

Frank "Wyso" Wysochansky is working in his basement studio, a coal-pit-dark den brightened by his wall painting of a Mexican landscape with donkeys. Using a pocket knife, he draws a blocky man and woman on a piece of paper coated with melted crayons gathered from kids near his home in Blakely, Lackawanna County. His subject is one of coal mining's most intimate scenes: a wife scrubbing her husband's shirt while he's wearing it, aching knees on floor, sore hands in a tub of hot water.

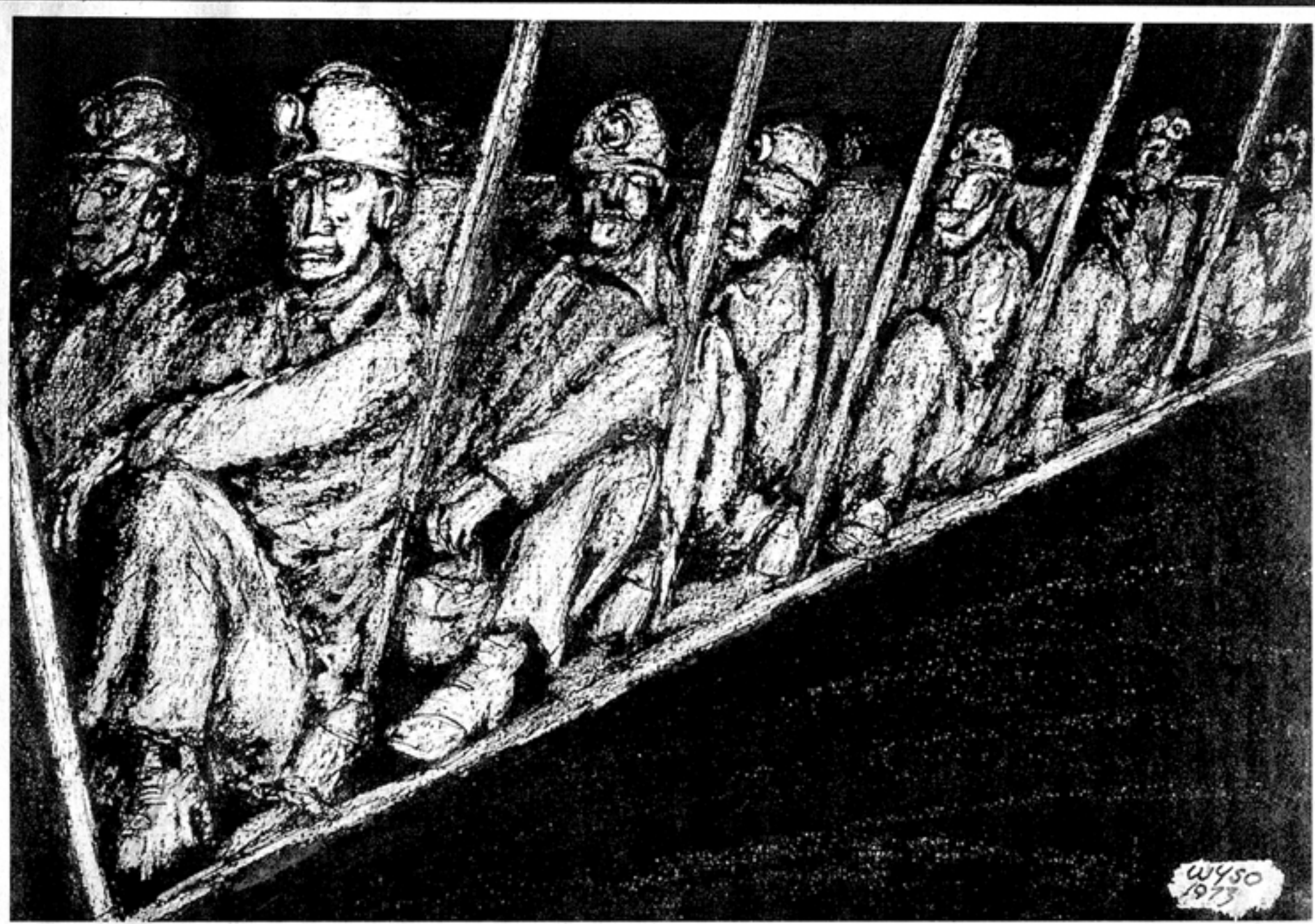
The picture is tough and tender, radiantly lit and seemingly wallpapered by coal dust. Wyso depicts a practical act in a large mining family unable to afford a shower or a week's worth of work clothes. At the same time he honors his father, who died in a mining accident, and his mother, who raised 12 children pretty much by herself. Bonded by a daily ritual, lost in their own world, Anelia and Joseph Wysochansky could be pilgrims — or Mary and Joseph.

This roughly reverential portrait hangs in a Lehigh University exhibition of mining images by Wyso (1915-1994), a self-taught artist obsessed by particular, peculiar visions. A grimy dignity clings to these muscular, mystical views of drilling and shoveling, drinking and smoking. Each picture taps a deep vein; each picture ap-

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WORKING 12 hours a day, six days a week, self-taught artist Frank Wyso created more than 5,000 works of art.



WORKS by late Lackawanna County artist (clockwise from right) touch on all aspects of the miner's life, from shoveling coal, getting cleaned up at home, being shuttled with others into a mine and the legacy of mining handed down from father to son.

Photos courtesy of Frank Wyso Charitable Foundation



THE DETAILS

FRANK WYSO

What: Exhibition of roughly reverential coal-mining scenes by a self-taught, visionary artist whose father died in a mining accident.

When: Through Feb. 19

Where: Siegel Gallery, Iacocca Hall, South Mountain campus, Lehigh University, Bethlehem

Hours: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Mon.-Thurs., 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fri.

Info: 610-758-3615, www.luag.org, www.frankwyso.org



WYSO

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pears carved from coal.

The show is a collaboration between the Frank Wyso Charitable Foundation and the Lehigh University Art Galleries, which regularly exhibits works by primitive, ecstatic creators. It's coordinated by Steven Lichak, a trustee/curator for the Wyso trust, a senior producer in Lehigh's Digital Media Studio and the director of a Wyso documentary. Wyso's humane views of an inhumane industry remind Lichak of his Lackawanna County childhood, when he heard stories about his mining grandfathers who died from black-lung disease.

Lichak, 46, is leading the charge to make Wyso an outsider artist better known outside northeastern Pennsylvania. His partners are four of Wyso's brothers, all of whom are priests, each of whom steered the career of a bachelor brother more interested in making pictures than promoting them.

"Frank ate, drank and slept art his whole life," says Father Walter Wysochansky from his parish church in Ambridge, Beaver County. "He was just infatuated with the life of the coal miner. He never married, although, yeah, he was handsome and funny enough to have plenty of girls going wild over him. He married art, and that was it."

Born to his calling

Father Walter believes his brother was born to create. As a youngster Frank drew on all sorts of surfaces, including sheepskin jackets. He was so talented with pen and pencil, he worked for a high-school yearbook when he was in elementary school.

Wyso's brothers aren't sure why he was driven to draw. Art may have been an outlet for a loner in a big clan. Then again, he may have been inspired by mining's dangerous drama, a reality reinforced by the recent disaster that killed 12 miners in Sago, W.Va. Wyso saw his father's legs covered in leeches, sucking bad blood from sores. He watched his mother stiffen at the sound of emergency whistles: short signals for severe injuries, one eerily long note for fatal cave-ins. He saw wives faint when their husband's bagged corpse was dropped on the front porch as callously as a sack of potatoes.

This cruel life was softened by caring deeds. Wives cooked mushrooms picked by their miner husbands on the way home from work. At the end of shifts children flocked to their fathers for hugs and left-over sandwiches. In the summer, when the mines shut down, families had more time to sing, dance and tell stories.



Courtesy of Frank Wyso Charitable Foundation

WITH THEIR HULKING BODIES and searchlight eyes, Wyso's miners are primeval characters.

They drank wine they made and ate soup with vegetables they grew, cooked with burning coal they cracked.

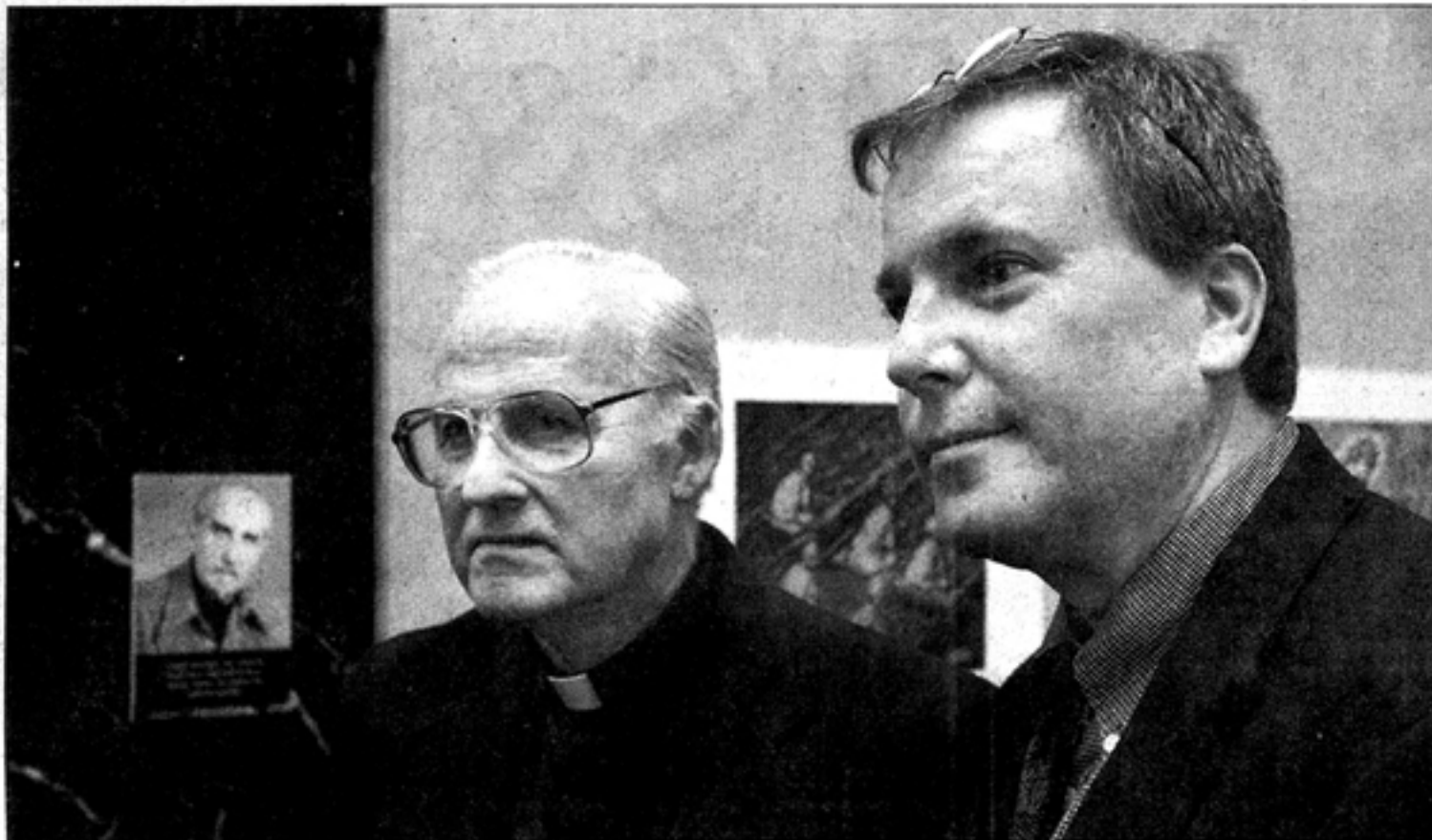
Like many kids of miners, Wyso left school early, at age 13. During the Depression he made money by selling coal he picked illegally. As Lichak points out, dog-hole mining was doubly dangerous. There were no supervisors around to help injured pickers. Caught by mining bosses, they often received brutal, biblical punishment. Cracking coal without permission could mean cracked heads.

In 1935 Wyso joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, one of the New Deal's many work-relief programs. On Jan. 13, 1936, he was in a CCC camp in California when his father was killed by a falling rock in a Wilson Colliery mine. Wyso couldn't make it home in time to attend the funeral. He never forgot the loss, or the guilt. For decades he relieved his pain by drawing proud miners and adoring sons.

Anelia Wysochansky was pregnant with Walter, her youngest child, when her husband died. Unable to care for such a large family, she sent three of her kids that year to a Ukrainian orphanage in Philadelphia. Stanley and Mary left St. Basil's within two years; John stayed for six. He became a priest along with his brothers Constantine, Demetrius and Walter.

Frank continued to follow a secular path. From 1943 to 1946 he served in the Marines. After leaving the military, he decided to become a serious artist. Funded by the G.I. Bill, he studied watercoloring and cartooning at a school in Scranton. He set up a studio in the basement of his mother's house, where he lived until his death. He enlivened the dingy space by painting the walls as a festive Mexican vista.

Wyso lived on a Marine pension and his mother's generosity. For a decade he earned money by selling cartoons to journals for miners and dentists. To satisfy his soul, he painted Ukrainian and



Demetra Stamus Special to The Morning Call

THE REV. JOHN WYSOCHANSKY and Steve Lichak, a trustee of the Frank Wyso Foundation, discuss the work of the priest's brother, Frank Wyso, at the opening of the late artist's Lehigh University show.

Amish folk scenes, clowns and monks. Thinking his career would be more profitable with a specialty, his brothers convinced him to concentrate on mining pictures.

"We pushed him into a unity of theme," says Father Walter. "We told him to paint what he knew best: his backyard."

Guided by his siblings, Wyso transformed a small world into a big world. He depicted miners drilling in a cave and smoking a pipe in a cave-like tavern. He portrayed them huddled in coal cars like ship slaves and lunching with the rats that warned them about dangerous gases. He gave them chiseled faces, flickering colors and shifty, searchlight eyes. He made them folksy characters, primeval creatures.

A spiritual activist

Wyso could be political. He hung miners on crucifixes to ennoble their sacrifices and protest their terrible conditions. He could also be spiritual. In one of his sculptures, a miner hugs a kerchiefed woman and a model of a Ukrainian church. The tabletop bust is more than a tribute to his parents; it blesses that coal-country trinity of mother, mother church and mother earth.

Never a salaried miner, Wyso lived a minerly life. He worked in his coal pit of a studio 12 hours a day, six days a week, stopping only on Sundays. Never a hermit, he walked every day to a local grocery store. He cut quite a figure in his cowboy boots, 10-gallon hat and bolo-tie beard. He resembled a well-groomed Wyatt Earp.

Wyso never drove a car and never owned one. His impatience prompted him to use pens and inks, which dried faster than oils. He could be abrasive, especially when he thought viewers misread his

pictures.

"He was a cantankerous son of a gun," says Father Walter. "He could never tolerate a phony. What you saw of Frank was what you got. He was as transparent as can be. He was a noble person."

The Wysochansky brothers knew that Frank had neither the time nor the personality to make his career flourish. So they became his art guardians. They paid for his materials; Father John estimates he's spent \$15,000 on framing alone. They sold his works in their parishes. They served as his agent-publicists, capitalizing on their door-opening credentials. Even the most jaded curator, after all, will reserve time for a priest.

Supervised by his siblings, Wyso received more than 50 solo shows. Father Walter, for example, secured an exhibit for his brother at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, where Walter led a parish church at the time. A Wyso watercolor hung in a national exhibit curated by John Canaday, then an influential art critic for The New York Times. A French publication listed Wyso as a contemporary American visionary.

On his own, Wyso conquered a fear of flying. His brothers helped him conquer a fear of rejection spurred by the cutthroat business of cartooning. "I remember him throwing that doggone rejection envelope on the couch," says Father John from his parish church in St. Clair, Schuylkill County, "and saying some choice words."

A new champion

In the early '90s, Wyso found an ally outside the family. Steven Lichak was a Lehigh University graphic designer in his early 30s, a fellow sculptor with a similar heritage. Lichak grew up in Dunmore, Lackawanna County, the grandson

of miners killed by black-lung disease before he was born.

Wyso's images triggered some of his favorite childhood memories: crawling around abandoned breakers; listening to mining tales in basement kitchens heated by coal stoves.

Lichak began making a half-hour documentary on Wyso for WVIA, the public-television station in Pittston, Lackawanna County. He videotaped Wyso's uncommon creations with common materials. He made armatures of wire hangers and chicken bones, then covered the skeletons in a fast-drying, flexible compound used to repair cars. "If Frank had a bag of plaster, it was going to be a sculpture," says Lichak. "If he had a bag of sand, it was going to become an armature. He was so prolific, he made every professional artist look like a piker."

Wyso guided Lichak through a house bursting with art. He stacked paintings along walls, 15 to 20 deep. After running out of side space, he made mazes in the middle of the living room. "What do I need furniture for?" he said, sounding like a classic bachelor and obsessive artist who detested vacuums.

Wyso filled emotional gaps by worshipping his mother. After Anelia Wysochansky died in 1983, he kept her bedroom the way she left it, with one notable exception. Over the bed he placed a four-foot crucifix he made with rosary beads as big as baseballs.

Lichak finished the Wyso documentary in 1994. Two weeks later, his subject died from cardiac failure. His memorial service featured a prayer card with his portrait of Christ in mourning.

Lichak shelved the Wyso project after WVIA declined to broadcast the video (It remains unaired). The Wysochansky brothers re-

fused to mothball their mission. Over the next decade, Father Walter periodically asked Lichak to graduate from Wyso filmmaker to chief champion. Each time Lichak politely rejected the invitation. He was too busy with his work and his family, he explained. He was an artist, not an art promoter. He wasn't especially religious.

Lichak: "You know, Father, I'm not the holiest man in the world."

Father Walter: "That's OK, Steven. We'll pray for you."

Two years ago, Lichak accepted Father Walter's challenge. He figured his daughter, Brooke, now 8, was old enough not to require constant attention from himself and his wife, Nancy. Aided by high-speed computers and digital cameras, he could easily record Wyso's zigzags. Most important, he was spiritually ready. Helping the Wysochansky brothers, he realized, was his calling.

Lichak's calling has become a second career. He's catalogued nearly 3,000 of Wyso's estimated 5,000 works. He's built floor-to-ceiling storage shelves, updated a Web site and organized shows at Lehigh and Monsoon, the Bethlehem gallery that sells Wyso pictures and sculptures. Backed by the Lackawanna Historical Society, he's assisting a \$40,000 campaign to cast an eight-foot-high bronze statue of a miner based on Wyso's designs. It will be dedicated to Wyso's father, whose death in the Wilson Colliery mine ended his dream of being a church singer.

The sculpture is destined for a levee in Olyphant, across the Lackawanna River from Blakely. The site is symbolic, says Gene Turko, a Wysochansky family friend who chairs the Olyphant Coal Miners Memorial Association. It's about half way between Wyso's home and the church that his mother attended every day, sprinkling ashes from a pouch to make ice less slippery.

Lichak has promoted Wyso in interviews with journalists covering the Sago mine tragedy. He's promoted Wyso while promoting primitive, wildly inventive works by Michael Wysochansky, Wyso's autistic nephew. He's encouraged Michael, a 56-year-old janitor, to ease his money worries by making three-foot-wide dollar bills.

Like the brothers Wysochansky, Lichak is shepherding dead and living visionaries. "It's a way of giving back to the world that I wouldn't ordinarily have," he says. "Frankly, I don't have a choice. It's the power of prayer, and the love of pure art."