



LARRY LINDAHL

## Family Business

Artist Bruce Aiken is a legend at the Grand Canyon. His paintings brought him acclaim, and so did his 33-year tenure as caretaker of the Roaring Springs pump house. Although he retired in 2006, his son, Silas, is carrying on the family tradition.

By KATHY MONTGOMERY

SILAS AIKEN INTRODUCES HIMSELF to a group of hikers who have stopped to rest at a picnic table near his ranger station.

"Where are you from?" Silas asks.

"San Diego," answers one hiker.

"You?"

"Here, actually," Silas says.

The hiker nods, assuming, perhaps, that

Silas means that he's from Arizona. But when Silas says he's from here, he means it literally. He grew up *inside* the Grand Canyon, just a few feet from this very spot. The house that now serves as Silas' ranger station, 5.5 miles from the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, also happens to be his boyhood home.

Silas' parents, Bruce and Mary Aiken, moved into the Grand Canyon 5 years before Silas was born. Bruce, now well-known for his Canyon paintings, worked for the Park Service as caretaker of the pump house at Roaring Springs, which supplies water to the facilities in the national park. For 33 years, Bruce spent every April through November in what was the caretaker's home until he retired in 2006. Silas is the youngest of the three kids Bruce and Mary raised there.

These days, the pump is automated, and the house is the part-time residence of two park rangers who work alternating weeks to oversee the house, a nearby campground and the steady stream of hikers who stop by to fill up on water.

On this August day, the hikers arrive in a wave. Most are headed to Phantom Ranch along the river, having traveled that morning to the North Rim via shuttle. Silas pushes sunglasses up over dark, curly hair and answers questions with the ease of someone who grew up there.

The banter feels easygoing, but serves a serious purpose. It's what the Park Service calls P-SAR, preventive search and rescue. By far, the most common injuries in the Canyon are heat-related. It's part of Silas' job to help prevent those injuries. The banter merely serves as prelude to the message he delivers like an evangelist: "Drink plenty of fluids and try not to hike during the hottest part of the day," he says. "That's the most important thing."

"See you next time," he says, and heads back to the house, moving with the long, loose strides of the high-school basketball player he was. On his way back to the ranger station, he passes the basketball hoop he and his dad installed in 1994. He hasn't used it for a while. His "court," a cottonwood-shaded clearing, needs work. "Some mules came through here," he says, smiling.

But that doesn't mean he doesn't think about basketball. As head basketball coach of Grand Canyon High School, Silas admits that some days, it's all he thinks about.

Back at the ranger station, Silas dons a wide-brimmed straw hat and begins to cut the lawn with an electric Weed Eater.

"It's either this or a dull push mower," he says with a shrug, adding that he's pretty sure it's the same mower he's seen in a photo he thinks dates to the 1950s. "Down

GRAND  
CANYON

here it's a different world, you know? You can't just go to The Home Depot."

Bruce planted the grass Silas is cutting in 1979 after the current house was built. The helicopters that delivered supplies created so much wind that the dirt was forever blowing into the house. The lawn provided dust control. But gardening was also Bruce's passion. He manicured box elders along the helipad and planted Virginia creeper along the porch. A hedge of irises he transplanted from the original caretaker's house, since demolished, still blooms bright yellow in spring. A yucca Bruce planted from a seed now stands taller than the house.

For a time, the house sat unoccupied. When Bruce and Silas came back to visit for a couple of days in June 2009, they found the whole yard overgrown.

"We ended up doing yard work the

"like Huck Finn's," but with cool parents. Mostly home-schooled until he was in the fifth grade, Silas spent days swimming in Bright Angel Creek and catching trout with his hands, listening to Dodgers games on an AM radio and playing baseball with his dad. He inherited his dad's love of the game, and took up basketball by default after he outgrew the only baseball offerings on the South Rim.

At night, the family played cards or invented games. There was a lot of music. To this day, all three Aiken kids are musical. The family also entertained a steady string of guests, a mix of friends and distressed hikers. The conditions created a close-knit, gregarious clan.

Back at the picnic table, groups of hikers assemble and reassemble.

One remembers "the guy who lived here a long time."

P R A T T ' S

Q &amp; A



## Scott MacIntyre

Former *American Idol* Contestant

How has Arizona influenced your music?

One time I wrote a song about living out in the boondocks with cactuses, because when I first moved to North Scottsdale, there was nothing up there. Now it's developing so fast. I love coming back here after traveling around the world because it's one of the only places I can really come back to and write new songs, record and just focus on music. Most of my new album, *Heartstrings*, was written and recorded here.

Which Arizona landmark would you vote for as the next *American Idol*?

I'd say Pinnacle Peak. Whenever I have a day off, I love hiking it to get some exercise. It's great to get out in the open air and get above the city. The diversity of hiking in Arizona is something you can't experience anywhere else.

If you were trying to impress Simon Cowell, where would you take him for lunch?

I'd take him to Greasewood Flat in Scottsdale, and give him a taste of some real Arizona cowboy fare.

How do Arizonans compare to the people you've met while traveling with *American Idol*? They're amazing. There's quite a spirit of enthusiasm when it comes to music, whether it's the jazz scene or the local celebrity scene. I always feel the most welcome here. I look forward to performing many more concerts in Arizona.

— Dave Pratt is the author of *Behind the Mic: 30 Years in Radio*



BRUCE AIKEN

In the 1980s, Silas Aiken enjoyed swimming near his boyhood home in the Grand Canyon.

whole time," Silas says. "I realized that someone needs to be here. That's when the clouds kind of parted and I realized this is where I'm supposed to be."

Silas took a leave of absence from the job he held for 7 years as a physical education teacher in Mesa and asked to volunteer at the house. He served as a volunteer for one summer. The Park Service hired him the following year.

With forgotten memories lurking around every corner, Silas says working in his childhood home is "weird and surreal and good." He describes his childhood as

"I never met him," he says. "But I met his son."

"That was me," Silas says.

"Really? That was you? No kidding," the hiker says, brightening. "What was it you were selling? Gatorade?"

"Lemonade," Silas answers.

"Right, lemonade. I do miss the lemonade."

"I miss the lemonade myself," Silas says.

Later, a hiker asks Silas about his schedule. Silas explains that he lives here 8 days before hiking out for 6.

"It's almost like your place then," he says.

"Yes," Silas agrees. "Almost."