

In recollection of an elegant artist and man



Bethe Dufresne

Have you heard the one about the census taker who encountered a naked lady with 17 children? "I'm a nudist," she explained. "You aren't a nudist, you just haven't had time to get your clothes on," was the census taker's reply.

I heard the story in church Friday, during a memorial service for the artist Nelson C. White (1900-1989). It was White himself who told it, on a record album he made called "Connecticut Characters." On it, he mimicked the voice of storyteller Henry Goodale.

White was quite a character as well,

but that's only a small part of the story.

I walked out of the First Congregational Church in Old Lyme, like several hundred other people who had come to pay tribute to Nelson White, feeling good about mankind. White had that kind of effect on people, and it was altogether fitting that his voice should be resurrected for a gathering in his memory.

No one who knew White thought there was anything peculiar about including a slightly naughty, but really ever so sweet, joke in the church service. As an artist and a man, one of White's greatest gifts was the ability to put the world in proper perspective.

Friday, the one who best put White's life in perspective for me was Lloyd Richards, artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's annual National Playwrights Conference. The founder and president of the seaside Waterford theater center is one of White's sons, George C. White.

"You should go see my father" is a suggestion George White frequently made to me over the years, and I'm sure to many others also. Anyone who took

See **DUFRESNE** page D2



Jack Sauer/The Day

■ Nelson C. White, seated, with a son, Nelson H., in the Waterford studio.

Dufresne

From D1

him up on it was richly rewarded.

Richards eloquently recalled his first visit, more than 20 years ago, to the O'Neill Center and to the exquisite stone mansion at White's Point, which was home to Nelson and Aida White, who still lives there.

"They could not have been more gracious to me," said Richards, "but it was also clear that they could not have been less gracious to anyone else who approached their door."

There was something unusual about George White's invitation to the O'Neill, Richards remembered. It said, "Bring your family."

"Hospitality became the byword of the conference itself," said Richards, just as family — in its best incarnation — became the model. The result was a loving and challenging environment for playwrights that has produced outstanding works for the American theater.

Nelson and Aida White, said Richards, sat on the benches every year, epitomizing "the character and commitment to excellence."

It is surely not coincidental that Nelson White was exposed at an early age to another famed artistic colony, also set in a beautiful natural environment and headed by someone renowned for hospitality. As a 3-year-old, White was brought to the Florence Griswold House in Old Lyme, home of the Old Lyme Impressionists, by his father, the eminent painter Henry C. White.

Appropriately, the Griswold House was the

scene of a reception Friday after the service.

As landscape painters, the Whites — including Nelson's son, Nelson H. White — are known for celebrating the beauty of the natural world. Nelson C. White found numerous other ways to celebrate the beauty of people.

Richards explained it best, describing how White treated everyone with the kind of reverence an artist brings to a beloved subject, "rendering each of us in a manner that revealed our natural beauty even in moments that revealed our natural rage."

White would have been the first to admit that rage has a place in the world, but it was not one of his own characteristics. That he could accept it in others while eschewing it in himself illustrates so well that there was nothing false about this genial man.

He came into the world with certain undeniable assets — wealth, intelligence, talent. The history of society documents that the possession of such assets by no means guarantees gratitude and charity, but in Nelson White, it produced an abundance of both.

I suspect that one of the reasons White didn't much like modern art is because so much of it is angry. I recall that when I talked with him about it in 1982, he was quick to say that he didn't disapprove of modern art, or political art, just that it was not his preference.

He could not be false, and rail against a world that he had found to be so beautiful. Neither could he be false and rail against those who had found it otherwise.

What he could and did do was share the bounty of his world, and the greater bounty in his heart, with those who came to his door or crossed his path.

George White, who like his father has chosen a life of service to the art world rather than service solely to his own art, read from Corinthians, Chapter 13, at Friday's service. Fittingly, the verse is about charity.

Charity, says the Bible, "Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil."

Nelson White, recalled the Rev. Robert Bryan, "was always expecting the best in people, and found it."

I remember thinking that White wore a bow tie like a flower. After a conversation with him, I felt like I had been given a bouquet.

"He created an environment that was a work of art, in which we all moved in beautiful harmony," said Richards. "He was a man, a gentleman, an artist."

Friends recalled that it was always fun being with Nelson White, who invariably preceded a service pitch for community culture by telling a funny story. Friday, once again, he left us laughing.