

Suffolks's fast-food folk artist

"Now that's really fine," 94-year-old says of Hardee's gift

BY ROBERT LITTLE
STAFF WRITER

SUFFOLK – His artwork fetched \$600 in SoHo, but John R. Mason wasn't impressed.

The Virginia Reach Center for the Arts displayed his drawings, but Mason didn't go.

Suffolk's 94-year-old "Hardee's artist" doesn't draw for Money or fame.

But a free biscuit and a cup of coffee?

„I never expect so much,“ says Mason.

Officials for Boddie-Noell Enterprises, which owns about 350 Hardee's restaurants, gave Mason a certificate last week, granting him free breakfast for the rest of his life.

Only a few other people have received

lifetime free-food certificates. But Mason has become somewhat of a community celebrity – and he is good for business.

For the past six years, Mason could be found most weekday mornings sitting at the corner table at Hardee's in Suffolk West Plaza sketching felt-tip drawing on pieces of 26-cent-poster-board, in between sips of coffee and bites on peanut butter sandwiches.

His drawings, mostly of birds, moons and churches, surfaced at a Virginia Beach exhibit that was sponsored by a Manhattan gallery selling them for a few hundred dollars each.

Now people tickle in almost daily to visit his fast-food studio, snatching a few of his drawings. Some give him money, some don't. Either way, he grips their hand and flashes them a big, toothy smile.

„I always come here, doing drawings and things, ya' know,“ he said thursday, wearing his customary suit and tie. „Free coffee? Good Lord, for

me? Now that's really fine.“

Free breakfast for life might not sound like much of a commitment to someone 94 years old. But Mason has plenty of relatives who hit 100 and then some.

His free-food certificate is good and any Hardee's the company owns, not that he'd ever go to a different one. The Suffolk Hardee's is more like a community diner than a fast-food joint. And Mason enjoys the role of resident patriarch, sitting in a favorite seat, surrounded by familiar people, growling about the same politicians.

„There really ain't a stranger in the world to the man,“ said Shirley Humphrey, the hostess who looks after the Hardee's regulars.

„People come in all the time asking for the man who does the drawings, she said.

„And he'll tell you all about the drawings, every one. Just ask him,“ she said. „He'll make you take one, too.“

gets free breakfast for life



John R. Mason, 94, holds one of his drawings in his „studio“ in a Suffolk Hardee's. Mason's art has been featured in art galleries and sold for hundreds of dollars, but the only payment he has ever received is free breakfast for life in the fast-food restaurant.

MICHAEL KESTNE/ STAFF