

# PREFACE

Fifteen minutes: a quarter of an hour. Fifteen minutes: the time artist Andy Warhol said everyone would be famous for. Fifteen minutes: the time that the sculpture *Green Lightning* by Buffalo artist Billie Lawless was lit. Just 15 minutes. It took more than a year and hundreds of hours to build, and at least a month to assemble and install. But in 15 minutes, its life in Buffalo was officially over.

Who actually got bamboozled in Buffalo? Was it the City when the sculpture was lit and there were dancing neon penises? Or was it Billie Lawless, who had jumped through all the hoops and had every department approve it, only to have the mayor order it demolished?

When I set out to write this book, I really did not know what the story was about. In September 2022, the idea jumped into my head out of nowhere. In November 1984, I was just 20 years old. I vaguely remembered the story and probably read about it over the years, but I never really thought about writing a book.

So as I searched the Internet for people relevant to the story, I saw a bigger picture, about a sculpture the city dismantled. This was a story about truth and honesty. It's about conservatism, obscenity, sleight of hand. It is a story that the more I dug into it, the more I was unsure of where it was going.

I kept changing my mind about what I thought the answer was, but I never was sure what the ending would be. In order to tell the story of *Green Lightning* and Billie Lawless, I'd have to tell the story of Mayor Jimmy Griffin, and of the Buffalo Arts Commission, and the City of Buffalo.

I spoke to so many wonderful people, some who easily gave their time. There were others who either remembered nothing or wanted absolutely nothing to do with it. I contacted dozens of people. But in the end, I believe I've been able to tell a story about my hometown of Buffalo, and how

public art can be controversial.

The mayor, the arts commission, and the urban renewal agency all approved it. Everyone up and down the line thought this was a positive idea for an area dead for decades, in a city that was trying to crawl back from depression and job loss. Originally planned for a private lot on the city's East side, a primarily Black area that rarely saw anything new and exciting, the councilperson moved it to a more prominent location right off the expressway where thousands of people could view it.

On the night of the unveiling, the artist thanked everyone, then turned on the power. There were gasps, then laughs as penises danced across the four panels. Billie was going to leave early, possibly to avoid the furor he foresaw or the press, but then the vice squad showed up.

Once the sculpture was up and standing, I don't think Billie Lawless thought Jimmy Griffin would act as swiftly as he did, and that was probably his fatal mistake. Because Jimmy Griffin didn't hesitate. When he made his mind up, that was it.

Several days later, Griffin ordered the statue taken down and sent a tree service to dismantle it.

What led up to this and what happened afterward is what we're going to explore.



# EARLY YEARS



“An artist must evaluate himself realistically. Many artists wish to excuse themselves from the ‘dues paying.’” Billie Lawless

HE STOOD PERCHED ABOUT thirty feet in the air, feeling the cold steel of his neon artwork under his feet. It was chilly and dark that mid-November day, but at that moment, he refused to back down. “I didn’t know what to do. I was extremely frightened and shaken,” he would recall.<sup>1</sup>

Who was he and why was he on that structure? His name is William Burns Lawless III, but he goes by Billie. He was born July 16, 1950 in Buffalo, New York, the third of 12 children born to Jeanne and William Burns Lawless Jr. His father went to Notre Dame Law School, then Harvard Law School. He served as youngest corporation counsel in Buffalo and was president of the Common Council when he was elected in 1956. After serving in that position, they appointed him to the New York State Supreme Court in 1960.

Six of Billie’s siblings would practice law, a path they expected him to take, but he took one much different from the rest of his five brothers and six sisters.

He would attend St. Joseph’s Collegiate Institute, a highly rated Catholic school in Buffalo. “I was a jock in high school,” he recalled in 1980.<sup>2</sup> As a rower at St. Joe’s in 1967, he was the stroke of the varsity team. “We were the first high school team to win both the American and Canadian varsity championships in the same year,” he said. In his senior year, Billie represented the United States at the World Rowing Championships

held in the Netherlands, competing in the straight four.<sup>3</sup> Mark Griffis, son of Buffalo sculptor Larry Griffis Jr., attended high school with Billie. “He was a lot older than I was. He was a great athlete at crew, yet that did not define him.”<sup>4</sup>



*Front Row:* J. Schneeberger, M. Miller, W. Mischler, Craig Pawlak, W. Else, E. Galisto, D. White, R. Rizzone, T. Heine, R. Ehol, R. Thill, W. Peters, C. Tarantino, L. Steinkirchner, *Row Two:* W. Group, T. Rizzo, D. Steinswald, W. Christman, C. Josef, F. Zan, K. Burren, F. Rodgers, M. Lodiick, T. Makin, W. Nowak, M. Becker, C. Hamy, P. Calandra, J. Kenney, M. Szymonak, P. Mundy, *Back Row:* T. Cesare, R. Reilly, R. Eberle, T. Biersbach, A. Alt, T. Lazarski, R. Cronin, G. Jakiel, L. Schork, N. Tarantino, Z. Malowicki, W. Lawless, *R. Standing:* Br. Thomas, *Missing:* R. Mills.

*1965 St. Joseph's Collegiate Institute yearbook.  
Billie Lawless, back row, far right. Courtesy of  
Craig Pawlak.*

Billie was involved in the art club at school and developed an interest in art from Mark's father, who was a family friend. Although he had an interest in art, “artistic inclinations were not encouraged for males at my school,” Billie said. “As a matter of fact, we even thought the members of the jazz quartet were a little funny.”<sup>5</sup>

His father authored a famous opinion in 1967, after Black Muslims from three prisons sued New York State. His opinion stated the state prison system must recognize their Islamic religion.<sup>6</sup> In 1968, he quit his position as New York State judge to become dean of Notre Dame Law School in South Bend, Indiana and the family moved to nearby Niles, Michigan.

After graduating from St. Joe's in 1968, Lawless attended Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, to pursue rowing. He said he took political science courses that he failed. After writing some essays in the fall, an English teacher encouraged him to start art courses in the spring. He took a variety of classes, including performing, but he was shy, “so I stayed in the background,” he said.<sup>7</sup>

From 1970 to 1972, Lawless fought against the war in Vietnam. Draft Board officials removed his student deferment, which made him available for the draft, so he left Rutgers.

He then went to the University of Notre Dame in the fall of 1970 and studied with his friend, artist-in-residence. Konstantine Milonadis. He invited Billie to work at the studio which had a foundry, but he had to be enrolled in the University. Here was where Lawless learned about steel. “It was fire, probably. It’s primal. I love fire and torches and the way steel feels in my hands. I burned the third floor of a house down when I was about nine.”<sup>8</sup>

He said that from that day on, “I pretty much knew what I wanted to do with my life. I started working with steel and welding steel. I’ve always thought of that as being my base material.” Lawless said he didn’t know how he got into Notre Dame, but in 1989 he said he thought his father used his influence to get him into the school with an exception. “I don’t believe I had to submit grades or transcripts from my other university to be allowed to work there,” he said.<sup>9</sup>

In April 1971, the Draft Board informed him to report for induction into the armed forces. His Buffalo attorney, Carmin R. Putrino of Lipsitz, Green, Fahringer, Roll, Schuller, James, claimed that Billie’s lottery number of 120 was not reached. On May 6, 1971, he applied for classification as a conscientious objector. The draft board then changed his induction date to November 15, then again to December 28.<sup>10</sup>

On November 30, 1971, he sued in federal court in Buffalo to bar the government from inducting him into the armed forces. He said the time was over the 120 days permitted under law and asked for it to be canceled. They asked the court to issue an injunction to prevent any attempts to induct him.<sup>11</sup> Lawless dropped his suit on December 20 when the draft board agreed to cancel his induction order and consider his conscientious objector application.<sup>12</sup>

On December 22, 1971, Billie Lawless married Bonnie Link in Buffalo, then the couple moved to New Jersey, where he returned to Rutgers University to finish his degree. Billie was taking art classes and working with Melvin Edwards, a famous African-American sculptor. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1974 and moved back to Buffalo in June 1974. (The marriage lasted four years, and they divorced in 1975.)

About 1976 Billie was living on Delaware Avenue near Forest Avenue and founded Lawless Studios, creating functional art work, “which was essentially ...art furniture, it was steel furniture that combined steel with stained glass.” He said, “I came up with the idea of doing functional

pieces that people can relate to and, obviously, there's a need for. I was doing tables and chairs and music stands, candelabras, fireplace screens, combining steel with stained glass. When I started doing my functional work, I thought it would be interesting to combine different materials, so I started actually inlaying stained glass into the pieces so that the tables had, I thought, something that no one had ever done before."<sup>13</sup>

By 1977, his art was developing, and he was creating parody art. "During the late '70s there started to become a transition in my work where I ...became a viable small business. I was able to support more of my interests in sculpture, which was my first love." By the early '80s he was "spending perhaps 50 percent of my time on functional work, 50 percent of my time doing my sculpture work."<sup>14</sup> He admitted it wasn't as easy to sell a sculpture as it was a functional piece. He saw corporations and banks as the "new patrons of the arts" in 1979, and started asking for their financial help for his sculptures.

He won a grant from Sculpture Space, Inc. of Utica, New York to build a 19 foot steel sculpture that would be too expensive to create on his own. So Lawless approached Kenneth Lipke of Gibraltar Steel, who agreed to donate \$9,000 worth of steel. They displayed the finished sculpture on the front lawn of the Gibraltar plant in the Buffalo suburb of Cheektowaga.<sup>15</sup> The company removed the sculpture after they downsized and moved. (Its current whereabouts is unknown.)

In September 1979, he purchased a home at 324 Highgate Avenue a few blocks from University at Buffalo. He had his office in the house and converted the garage into a studio. "I was pretty much working a lot of the time," he said.<sup>16</sup>

The inside of Billie's home was as conventional as the artist himself. When the *Buffalo News'* Margaret Sullivan visited his home in 1984, she said, "There's a big abstract painting in the bathroom, right where most people have their towel racks. In the living room, there are dozens of colored paper cutouts shaped like rats that scurry up a wall or hang by their tails from the ceiling. Everywhere there are sculptures, including one called *The Politician*, an all-steel structure that looks like a cross between a tricycle and a wheelbarrow."<sup>17</sup> This was an initial design for what would become a popular sculpture later in his career.

He lived in the house with his girlfriend, Kathy Quinn, who had attended fashion school in New York City before arriving in Buffalo. She attended

University at Buffalo to study design and embark on a career combining her training in fashion and art.

In a 1980 interview with the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, she discussed bejeweling clothing. She said it was hard to do it on her own, but she had the support of her boyfriend, Billie Lawless. “Economically it’s feasible to live (in Buffalo),” she said. “And it’s stimulating because there are a lot of artists here. There is more of sharing, it’s not as fast and commercial as New York City. I’d like to eventually work with architects to design stuffed walls in new buildings — something reflecting the community, or perhaps an abstract design... It’s possible. Banks and businesses are a lot more adventurous today.”<sup>18</sup>

Billie’s art began progressing into more sculpture work in the late ’70s. “I started doing three-foot pieces,” he said, “then that led to six and seven, eight-foot pieces.” He received encouragement from George Enos, who owned the Enos and Sanderson steel company, to do a larger piece. “He suggested that ...they would make a donation. I could do a larger piece, which actually meant renovating part of my studio so I could go right to the ceiling, and that was the creation of *Lament* in 1979.”<sup>19</sup>

His first neon piece was *Sink Totem #2*, assembled in Summer, 1979. “I decided to do a vortex of neon tubes going down the drain of this old sink.”<sup>20</sup> Flexlume sign company had been providing technical help for his work “since the day I lumbered into Flexlume... with a found sink... to the dismay of the employees.” He worked with Paddy Rowell, Sr., Paddy Jr., and Pete D’Orsaneo. They expressed reservations about doing the neon because of the high voltage used until Billie assured them he would display it safely.

Lawless added, “And there is even a macabre element here, mixing high voltage with water.”<sup>21</sup> And no wonder they were concerned.

From 1980 to 1982, Lawless attended State University of New York at Buffalo, studying with poetic modernist artist Duayne Hatchett, (who assembled “junk metal and found objects for sculptures and print plates”)<sup>22</sup> and George Smith. He graduated in June 1982 with a Master of Fine Arts.

In 1980, the *Gowanda News and Observer* published two articles about the local art scene. In the second one, they explored the views of artists, with “varying levels of accomplishment, on the subject of who defines art, and their struggle for recognition.”

They included comments from Lawless, where he said, “Art is a com-



modity and as such, its acceptance is proportional to what the market will bear.” He said that gallery directors know what their clientele will purchase, and that determines who’s exhibited. “Galleries exist to put out an artist’s works, mine or anyone’s. The immediate benefit is that it allows any artist to exhibit nationally, affording the artist time to work as opposed to marketing. Personally, I’m comfortable with galleries. Flaws exist, but they exist in any system.

“An artist must evaluate himself realistically.” He asked why, “many artists wish to excuse themselves from the ‘dues paying.’ I can tell you a period of hustling, door knocking, and all that goes with it is necessary.” He said that Buffalo is a blue collar town, and it can support only a few artists. Because there were not enough galleries to handle all the work, he said that artists should export to “New York, Toronto, wherever ... If the talent is there, the recognition will come.”<sup>23</sup>

Mark Griffis said that Billie was intelligent and an interesting person. Rowing would remain a constant in his life through college and beyond. From 1982 to 1985, he was a rowing coach at his old high school St. Joseph’s Collegiate Institute, as well as at the West Side Rowing Club.



In 1966, brothers Larry and Guy Griffis, along with others, founded the Ashford Hollow Foundation. Named for the sculpture park started by Larry in Ashford Hollow in Cattaraugus County, south of Buffalo. In 1968 they purchased brick buildings on Essex Street on Buffalo’s West Side that had been an icehouse, firehouse and other properties, and started the Essex Arts Center.

Larry converted part of the property into artists’ studios and set up welding and foundry facilities. Guy did some theater in the building. Around 1974, a group of college student artists hung artwork outside their studios inside the Arts Center and started a gallery called Hallwalls. The Artists Committee (a group inside of Essex) said some artists had issues with Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the big gallery in Buffalo.

After a series of back-and-forth debates between the Committee and the Albright-Knox in 1975, the Artists Committee held their own sculpture show, the first “Western New York Invitational Sculpture Exhibit” in

Delaware Park, held behind the Albright-Knox.

By 1976, there was a shuffling of people and reorganization at Essex Arts Center. Under the new visual arts side was Hallwalls Gallery, directed by Robert Longo and Charles Clough. Their goal was to search for new and exciting art. In the end, Billie Lawless would find his way there. By 1982, Clough had left Buffalo for the greener grass of New York City. “The city is a disaster,” he said. “Everybody seems to leave Buffalo. That is a rule. It’s such a wasteland.”<sup>24</sup> (Clough didn’t really hate Buffalo, as he returned in 2013.)<sup>25</sup>

In 1980 the Artists Committee dissolved, but their gallery and Sculpture Exhibition continued on. The 1981 Exhibition took place from September 5th through 27th. Artists Gallery curator Joy Pepper sent invitations to every known sculptor in the Buffalo area and twenty-eight replied. Artists Gallery Chairperson Kenneth E. Peterson said each artist could choose up to three of their works for the show. This made it a self-juried show that “provides for a richness and diversity” rarely seen.<sup>26</sup>

Billie Lawless, Duayne Hatchet, Marvin Bjurlin, Adele Cohen, Amy Hamouda, Larry Griffis, and Tony DeCorse were among those who exhibited. Several of those artists were well-received in New York City, and although some had considered moving to New York City (like Charles Clough did), they realized it was cheaper to live and work in Buffalo and “bring the finished work to New York.”<sup>27</sup>

“A lot of the more prominent local arts patrons here will buy work by a Buffalo artist,” Peterson explained, “but only if it’s been displayed in a New York gallery, when they could have bought the same work here for much less money.”<sup>28</sup>

The Essex Art Center is still running strong today and hosts community



*Sculptor Larry Griffis next to his sculpture "Birds Excited Into Flight" in Buffalo. He would encourage and help Lawless over the years. Courtesy of Nila Griffis. Lampman*

organizations, artists, and events.

# BUFFALO ARTS COMMISSION



“The beauty of Buffalo is that it’s a melting pot. It’s not a question of highbrow or lowbrow; it’s a question of quality.” Harold L. Cohen

ACCORDING TO THE LATE Alfred Price, Associate Professor Emeritus – Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University at Buffalo (U.B.), Mayor Jim Griffin was not a guy who one would have described as being well educated or sophisticated. “He was a kind of a rough and tumble guy, and a hard scrabble kind of guy,” he said.<sup>29</sup> They elected him to the Buffalo City Council to represent the Ellicott District in 1962 and in 1967, then to the New York State Senate, serving until 1977.

It was in 1977 that New York State Deputy Assembly Speaker Arthur O. Eve became the first serious African-American candidate for the office of mayor in Buffalo. Eve was a Civil Rights leader that had helped to negotiate with the Attica prisoners in 1971 and he rallied Black voters. He ran in the Democratic primary against Griffin and Corporation Counsel Leslie Foschio. Al Price said, given the changing demographics of Buffalo, he believed there was a concern with Eve running as a Democrat.

“In the politics of this city,” Price said, “there were so few registered Republicans, to win the Democratic Primary was tantamount to election, right?” Almost 80 percent of the Black community voted in that September 1977 primary, and Arthur Eve did the unimaginable, and won the Democratic Primary.

Peter J. Crotty had been Erie County Democratic chairperson from 1954 to 1965. His protégé, Joe Crangle, took over in 1965 and was at

odds with many people in the area. It was no surprise that Arthur Eve and Crangle were “really arch enemies,” Price said, “and as a consequence of that bad blood... there was an interesting kind of conundrum.”<sup>30</sup>

Amid all of that, Jim Griffin, after losing the primary, decided he would wage an outsiders race. “He had always been a ...maverick,” Price said. He was a registered Democrat, but was conservative, so he made the decision that he would run as an independent against Eve.

“So here’s Eve running as a Democrat,” Price recalled. “There were only 7,000 registered Republicans in the city ... and Griffin registers as an Independent. Traditionally in the ethnic politics of this city, there had been a Polish-Irish coalition faced off against an Italian and Black coalition.”<sup>31</sup>

Price said with Eve winning the Democratic primary, everyone assumed he would be a shoo-in. Then Griffin declared his independent candidacy. Where would his support come from?

Price said, “I can remember going to give a talk to a group of businessmen that met at the Hotel Lenox once a month. I was this new young hotshot and the name of the club was the Equity Club. My father had been a part of that group, so I got invited to come and give this talk.”<sup>32</sup>

“And I walked into the Hotel Lenox on North Street ... and tucked way back in the back corner of the restaurant, who do I spot but Jim Griffin and a woman named Alfreda Slominski.” She was the head of the Conservative Party in Western New York and had served as a Buffalo city councilperson and county comptroller for many years. Price found the meeting to be very interesting. “It was clear that the two of them were involved in a very deep conversation,” he said.<sup>33</sup>

Not long after that, the Conservative Party endorsed Griffin, so he ran on both the Conservative and Independent lines. Because Eve and Joe Crangle were arch enemies, “the Democratic Party just slowed down any... monetary support to the Eve campaign and Eve had to go into a substantial personal debt in order to even get signs up on lawns,” according to Price.<sup>34</sup>

Griffin ended up defeating Eve in the general election. According to Price, everybody wondered how he was going to govern.<sup>35</sup>

One person who got Griffin’s attention was Harold Cohen, the dean of the School of Architecture and Environmental Design at the University of Buffalo. Cohen had established a reputation dating back to about 1974 of being public spirited and interested in being an activist dean. Price said Cohen wanted to get the School of Architecture “pressed into service to

help the city in its efforts to rejuvenate and resuscitate itself and get out of the long term structural decline that it had fallen into.”<sup>36</sup>

Buffalo was a steel and grain milling city. Part of Griffin’s claim to fame was that he had been a grain scooper down on the waterfront. The grain industry was one of the industrial sectors of this region’s economy. Grain milling employed about 2,000 people as a single industrial sector in the 1930s, but by 1995 there were less than 200 people. “That’s a function of automation and the industrialization,” Price said. The economy was restructuring from manufacturing and heavy industry to services in the 1970s, and many people didn’t understand what was going on. Price added, “But we were right in the in the heart of darkness in the late ’70s when Griffin was elected.”<sup>37</sup>

Buffalo had nine council districts that corresponded to the socio-economic geography of the city. Griffin won strongly in South Buffalo and the East Side. But he had not done as well in the Delaware district, which was where Buffalo’s old money was, the center core of the city, and in North central, which was toward the University at Buffalo.<sup>38</sup>

Price said that Harold Cohen (and his counterpart David Perry, also from U.B.), in his capacity as Dean, went to the mayor-elect and told him he would need support from the entire city to govern.<sup>39</sup> How would Griffin accomplish that?

Private sector initiatives led the way in northeastern American cities, including Buffalo. Looking back into the late 19th century, the old money in the city called in Frederick Law Olmstead to create the park system, and that was done with private money and given to the city as a gift.

A century later, the downtown interests, the major banks and financial institutions in the city, got together with a few remaining industries in the city and formed an organization called the Greater Buffalo Development Foundation (G.B.D.F.)<sup>40</sup>

The business leaders saw the city had been stagnant for decades because of a lack of planning skills. G.B.D.F. hired the Philadelphia urban planning firm of Wallace McHarg Roberts & Todd and brought them to Buffalo. They wrote a report titled “The regional center: a comprehensive plan for downtown Buffalo, New York,” which was published in 1971.

“If you go back and look at that plan,” Al Price says, “many of the things that the plan called for, like the subway system and the new airport, a lot of those elements were defined in that plan. So all I did was I went to look at