

Roofer Transformed After Accident.

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Author: Miller, Heather Andrews

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Joe Jacobs was happily employed as a roofer when an injury on the job in 1974 brought an end to a satisfying career. For some time after the accident, he struggled to support his family. One day his nephew gave him a piece of soapstone and Jacobs began carving.

"A year later he had amazingly produced more than 40 works of art from soapstone, limestone, and ivory," said Addy, Joe's wife of 45 years, who speaks for him because he is hard of hearing. "He believes that every person has a creative gift but he had never discovered his up till this time."

Jacobs was recognized for his work this year with a National Aboriginal Achievement Award for arts and culture.

Originally from the Six Nations of the Grand River at Brantford, Ont., where he was born in 1934 into the Bear Clan of the Cayuga tribe, Jacobs looks to his Iroquois culture for inspiration for his work. He interprets legends and myths in both abstract and representational forms.

"One of the pieces he's been working on lately features an evil man with snakes in his hair, which is portraying a legend," said Addy. "He is proud to be keeping his culture alive through his work."

The Iroquois are recognized for their rich heritage and the ceremonies, spirits, curing rites, and dances are preserved and portrayed in Jacob's carvings. Now internationally-lauded as Canada's premier sculptor, Jacobs preserves his oral tradition in stone by taking key elements and creating flowing art. His work is found in every major museum in Canada, including the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Royal Ontario Museum and other public institutions and private galleries, as well as in numerous permanent collections.

Whenever their five grandchildren come to visit, they are soon found in the carving shop in the couple's home in Lewiston, New York.

"He sits them down with the stones and they pretend they are carving too," said Addy. "They range in age from 18 months to 16 years old and they all love to watch their grandpa work."

The Jacobs raised two boys and two girls who are now living away from home establishing households of their own. "We are blessed that they live near us so we get to see them often."

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Much of Jacobs' work is commissioned and interested collectors or museum curators quickly purchase any piece that he makes on speculation. "Every piece is bought and finds a home in a museum somewhere," said Addy.

In 1983, Jacobs was presented an honorary doctorate of law degree from Trent University, then an Iroquois art award in 1985. In 1989 he was received into the Order of Canada in recognition of one of his greatest accomplishments, the five-panel, 12-foot by 4-foot limestone relief that was installed in 1985 in the members' entrance of the House of Commons.

"Joe was honored to be given that commission, and he's humbled by all those important and well-educated people who walk by that work of his every day," said Addy.

Of the National Aboriginal Achievement Award, she says he is overwhelmed. "He can't believe that something he did with his hands could be that appreciated and he is so honored. We were both really excited at the March 31 awards ceremony in Saskatoon and pleased to be among the other very deserving recipients."

The couple was treated to a trip to Ottawa earlier in March when they met Prime Minister Paul Martin and other dignitaries.

"Right now we're floating on cloud nine, but it's time to get back to every day life," she said.

Mike Whetung of Ojibway Arts and Crafts nominated Jacobs for his recent award.

"Joe told me once that he believes God gave him the skills to be a carver after the accident which cost him his livelihood," he said from his home at Curve Lake, Ont. "Joe is somewhat of a pioneer in his style of carving. He is totally self-taught, but he took an art form that had been around for generations and elevated it to a new level, becoming a leader of a whole movement of carvers." In scarcely 20 years, Jacobs has forged a name for himself as a dedicated and gifted sculptor.

Whetung worked with Jacobs for many years.

"All the work for the parliamentary sculpture was done here at a studio we set up for him, with special power tools," he explained. The panels depict the story of creation as told by Iroquois legend, and the blocks of stone were not easy to move around, he said, adding

that the completed project makes for a pretty impressive entrance to the parliament buildings.

"When Joe was about to start that commission he told me that he'd been looking at the carvings that already existed in the House of Commons. He felt many of the artisans had just scratched the surface of the stone," said Whetung. "But Joe doesn't work that way. He gets right into the heart of the stone, and brings out its fullest potential." Jacobs is translating and preserving oral traditions and re-creating the images of Iroquois legends in the soapstone known as steatite, added Whetung. "His compositions beg oral interpretations and this is his contribution to the culture of his people. We are most proud to represent him and have his work on display."

Other galleries also regularly hear patrons praise Jacobs' sculptures displayed in their collections as well. One piece, on display at the Maslak McLeod Gallery in Toronto and entitled False Face and Turtle Rattle depicts the instrument used to call spirits in ceremony. The false face mask represents both good and evil. Another, entitled Tree of Peace on the Earth Turtle, depicts the cosmology story of the Six Nations. The turtle is the world, the tree represents nature and the eagle is the thunderbird, messenger to Manitou. The gallery's Web site quotes visitors as stating that once they have seen a sculpture by Joseph Jacobs they remember it forever. Many are aware of his work, and have seen pieces at the Curve Lake Indian Reserve where Mike Whetung operates his Ojibway Arts and Crafts.

Today the 71-year-old continues to carve and pursues the preservation of his culture. His career has been documented on film, television and in international publications and he is happy pointing the way to new directions and understanding of the Native culture of North America.

"I want to give permanence in stone to the legends of my people," he concluded simply. "I'm proud of my gift and anxious to continue telling my story."

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