

Nate the Carver

By Patrice Mindeok

Nate VandenBos releases tree spirits. He is an artist whose preferred medium is wood. Instead of tiny tools and a lump of clay, this sculptor works on a large scale, using a chainsaw and a tree stump or a log. Occasionally, his palette is a living tree.

An independent painting contractor by trade, Nate says, "Painting pays the bills, but carving is what I love to do." A half-Dutch, half-Irish, earthy, soft-spoken type, Nate began his hand carving with white-cedar walking sticks while on vacation in the eastern Upper Peninsula. He started that "whittling" while visiting his brother, who built Camp Paradise on 960 acres of land owned by Chicago-based Willow Creek Community Church. He was already enrolled at KVCC, working toward his associate's degree in liberal arts. While visiting his brother, he noticed a chain saw lying next to a dead arborvitae stump and experienced his "aha!" moment.

"Once I picked up that chainsaw, my hand carving became a thing of the past," he says. One of his first efforts was carving a series of 13 fantastic, Druidic-style faces into a remote grove of cedar trees bordering the Tahquamenon River at Camp Paradise. "As long as you don't girdle a live tree with your carving, it heals well," he stresses. "I can just imagine the look on hikers' faces when they come into that grove full of tree spirits." Nate doesn't race into the woods brandishing his chainsaw like a crazed lumberjack, slashing willy-nilly at any tree in his path. In his terms, he's an unabashed "tree-hugger" — in tune with Mother Nature and passionate about environmental and social causes. "Every living thing has a spirit, and I would never cut down a tree," he states firmly. He prefers to create his art on already fallen trees or the trunks left standing when a homeowner needs to remove a tree that threatens to fall on a building. "Their fate is already sealed," he says with a matter-of-fact shrug.

"I feel I am honoring the tree by turning it into a piece of art." Nate likes to work in red or white oak or cherry, pine and cedar.



Nate VandenBos with the tools of his trade.



The trees above are carved on Nate's brother's land near Paradise, Mich., in the Upper Peninsula.

Following his first foray with a chainsaw, Nate finished his arts degree. “The background I learned at KVCC in the basics of design, drawing and perspective helped me improve my carving skills,” he says. “I like the solidness of wood. When working with clay for ceramics, you sometimes have to build an underlying armature to hold it up, which takes a tremendous amount of time. Pottery is fragile. My wood carvings are much more substantial.” To keep the carvings from cracking due to weather

exposure, Nate recommends a simple remedy — annual applications of clear exterior deck sealer.

His impetus to learn even more about the chainsaw as an artist's tool came while watching a carving demonstration at the grand opening of a Kalamazoo-area building supply store. That prompted him to eventually seek out a local mentor, Ralph Gotham. “He taught me some of the technical aspects of the tools, because at that point, I didn't even know how to put a chain

on a saw,” Nate recalls. He also learned about chainsaws and how to maintain them through the expert staff at Denny's Saw Crib in Kalamazoo. “As a smaller shop, the guys there — Denny, Don and Floyd — always take the time to help me get comfortable with handling the different chainsaws and advise me on saw choices,” he says. There are smaller saws and special attachments used when detailing these types of carvings, including smaller gauge chains and bars with dime-sized tips. Finishing involves a hand-held grinder with a sanding disk, and Nate sometimes uses a small chisel to place pupils in eyes.

Nate and his wife, Karen, currently a trauma registrar at Bronson Hospital, have been married for 18 years. They are both Kalamazoo natives and live in a west side suburban home, their acreage accented with Nate's carvings, natural-looking native landscaping, and a vegetable garden. Karen has a Master of Science in Healthology and is pursuing her doctorate in Holistic Health from the American Institute of Holistic Theology. (As a side note, Karen says that her poetry was once published in *Encore* — Feb. 1997.)

“Think of the irony,” says Karen. “I work in a trauma department, and when



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Nate VandenBos

Nate first found this artistic outlet, I could imagine all the potential dangers and what could go wrong.”

Her husband is proud of his safety record, though. “I’ve never cut myself,” he says with a grin.

Nate’s official “outdoor studio” is located behind Handley’s Tree Service on Kalamazoo’s west side. David Handley trades space — a covered bay out behind a barn — for artwork, and he provides Nate large chunks of wood with which to work.

“I feel I am honoring the tree by turning it into a piece of art,” Nate says. His favorite hardwoods are red or white oak and cherry. In the soft woods, he enjoys working with pine and cedar. “The wood often gives me a gift,” he says. Unexpected patterns, colors or textures are revealed when he begins sculpting. “I recently carved a horse head from a piece of black walnut. It was spontaneous because the shape of the limb reminded me of the animal. The outer cambian layer was blonde and it had very dark inner layers. As I carved, the horse ended up with a beautiful natural blaze on its nose. That’s what I mean by a gift from

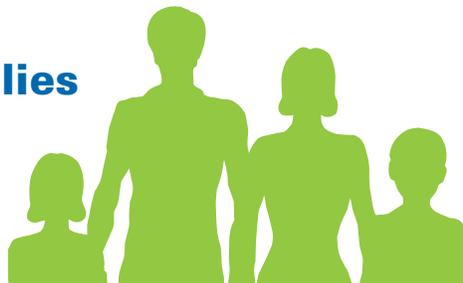


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Nate calls this 2006 piece “Opera Bear.”



the wood.”

Other creations are prompted by specific requests. The City of Portage issued a call last year for artists to help create designs that incorporated a canoe to illustrate the origin of the city name. Nate carved an entire canoe, painted it and placed two natural-color wood carvings of historical “voyageurs” inside. That piece immediately sold to a private collector.

“I do the eagles, bears, characters and other traditional carvings by request,” he says. Each is unique, but critics will readily lump those pieces into the “arts and crafts” category, rather than call them art. It’s a battle of semantics that Nate often observes on the blogs and Internet forums of carving sites he frequents, like www.chainsawsculptors.com.

“Art is art,” he says succinctly. He admits to dabbling in other forms, painting abstracts with watercolors or acrylics and has also embellished one wall of his home with a life-size mural. He’s a fan of Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionist style.

“I am amazed to be doing this,” he states. “I’m surprised I decided to take art in college. I was one of those kids who wished I could quit high school earlier to get out into the ‘real world’ and work. I heartily believed that until I was 39 years old, standing on a ladder painting a house, and I said to myself, ‘I think I’ll go to college now,’” he laughs. “That really changed my perspective on life. Once I began studying courses like sociology and psychology, it helped me to understand why I was who I was. The learning experience freed me up to decide to continue to be that way, or change a few things.”

On occasion, Nate donates artwork to help raise money for social or political causes near to his or Karen’s heart, a tradition that began while helping his brother at his Camp Paradise in the Upper Peninsula. The list of beneficiaries has ranged from the Bangor Lion’s Club Ride for Sight to Heifer International and from

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and still no one dances

they cluster like narcissus
turned to each other
as if the sun burns
in the center of their circle
music plays, but no one dances

parents hover around
the edges of the room, observing like biologists
with no professional distance
feeling their awkward ages more acutely than the kids do

the music is loud
throbbingly, annoyingly, unnervingly loud
a shout, "thank god we're not twelve anymore"
can barely be heard

suddenly the flowers become fish
a tiny school darting back and forth with one mind
food room, game room, food room
the music pounds louder than any surf
and still no one dances

flowers again, they divide into smaller bouquets
they bloom, sepals and petals moving rhythmically
they sway, they turn as if in a breeze
but they don't dance

Nina Feirer

Nina Feirer is a mother of four from Kalamazoo who loves gardening, writing, reading and beading. She finds inspiration for her poems in family relationships and in things both beautiful and mundane, like folding laundry and pulling weeds. This particular poem seems perfect as high-school prom season approaches.

Nate VandenBos

the Defenders of Wildlife to Amnesty International and the Audubon Society. "It's my way of giving back," he says.

The snowy winter months often silence Nate's chainsaws, but spring through fall finds them buzzing with activity. He enjoys being outdoors as often as he can, working with wood. The warmer weather also means he can enjoy another beloved avocation that finds him wielding wood — a three-wood. He's an avid golfer.

Despite his affable, laid-back demeanor, there's a rebellious undercurrent lurking just below the surface of this working-man-turned-artist. A life-long biker, VandenBos' eyes light up when he reveals his dream of riding his Harley Davidson through all 50 states in the U.S.A., creating a carving to leave behind in each one. You can almost hear the strains of Steppenwolf's rock classic "Born to Be Wild" playing as a theme song in the background. But it's not a cliché. The solid work ethic and determination he embraces make the adventurous, free-wheeling goal not an "if" but a "when." Of course, he'd trailer his bike much of the way in his official Tree Spirit hauler, loaded with his artist tools. And it's a dream that makes him happy just to speak it aloud, judging by the bright spark of laughter in his eyes and the ear-to-ear grin he employs when he shares the idea with others.

The chainsaw may seem like a highly unusual artist's tool, but one look at the glittering creations chefs produce by sculpting ice blocks, or the tree spirits Nate produces by sculpting wood, should cause an observer to realize that traditional, staid definitions of art don't apply to these "outside the box" endeavors.

Even after six years of labor-intensive wood carving, Nate has not tired of his chosen medium. "It has an outlet, so it pays for itself," he notes. "For me, there really is no greater satisfaction than doing what I love to do and having others appreciate it and purchasing a piece. That's an added gift that allows me to continue to carve." 🗿