



Photo Courtesy: Deb Cripps and Carl Hiebert

An Explosion Of Artistry

By: Deb Cripps

It is a rare entrepreneur who begins their work day when it is too early *and* too late for a cup of coffee. But for Robbin Wenzoski, rising from a warm bed in the blackness of night is not only the norm, it is when he does his most creative thinking.

At 2:30 am, Robbin ambles down a dark path toward what friends call “Woodhinge” and pauses under a starlit sky surrounded by five and twelve foot upright logs. Stepping inside his studio is like walking into a life-size potpourri. The wood floor is covered in fresh cherry, black walnut and maple shavings potent enough to conjure campfire memories. When day breaks, streams of light dance with dust, spilling over chainsaws, partially carved tree trunks and exquisite sculptures. This is no ordinary wood-working shop.

Born and raised in Golden, British Columbia, Robbin left home at age sixteen to push a broom in a unionized plywood plant. “It was 1978 when I took my first factory job. My dad was a mechanic who saw the end of the dirty thirties, so for him, success was defined by how thick your wallet was. And I was making over \$9.00 an hour back then, so it felt like I was on my way to being successful. It took a long time for me to go against my upbringing and put making money on the back burner.”

Over the next twenty years, Robbin’s life paralleled his father’s. He married, had four sons, and laboured in the predictability of machine design and maintenance. Week after week, year after year, paycheque to paycheque. But unlike his father’s era, when a man could expect to work at the same company from youth to retirement, Robbin began to witness a number of fellow employees being prematurely terminated. These ungraceful exits served as a warning and proved to be the catalyst that would dramatically change his life. “I saw a lot of guys escorted out of their jobs when they were still great workers. After years of service, they were given a quick handshake and twenty minutes to leave the building.”

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Seeking independence, Robbin ventured into the world of the self-employed as a Jack-of-all-trades doing electrical, plumbing and yard work. A likeable, hard-working man with a genuine friendliness and fierce commitment of always going the extra mile for customers, quickly rewarded him with many customers-turned-friends and all the business he could handle.

This new career path put him on track to a secure future that should have carried him from mid-life to retirement. But the human experience can be wonderfully fickle. Robbin’s inner-voice began to whisper that it was time to shake old-school values and the expectation that, for a man to be a proper provider for his family, he had to have a ‘real job’ and earn a regular paycheque. What soon began as a gnawing sense of creativity, suddenly erupted into a full-blown explosion of artistry.

“I was 42 years old when I picked up a chisel and carved my first sculpture of an abstract piece entitled ‘Synaptic Twist’. It was the only creative thing I



Photo Courtesy: London Tourism



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had done since a pencil portrait drawing at high school.” That sculpture led to competitions, exhibitions and numerous commissioned art pieces. After one year of carving, his work was evaluated by master carvers, as that of an artist with twenty-five years of experience.

CHANGING URBAN LANDSCAPES

In the six short years he’s been creating art, Robbin has literally carved his mark in the art world – and urban landscapes – like London, Ontario’s “Tree Trunk Tour”. London enhanced its reputation as the “Forest City” by commissioning Robbin to sculpt twenty-nine massive tree trunk sculptures throughout the city. He explains that along with the esthetics of artistry, there are huge environmental advantages. “Creating accessible street art out of old growth tree trunks that are destined to come down is an environmentally sound practice. The trees are given a second life and don’t end up in landfills.” London’s mayor, Anne Marie DeCicco-Best says, “London treasures its trees and green spaces. Thanks to Robbin’s imaginative blending of art and nature displayed throughout our community, London’s Tree Trunk Tour is rapidly growing into a significant tourist attraction across the region.”

Robbin is a loquacious artist who oozes with exuberance when showing his art and teaching others to discover the artist within. “During the last few years, I’ve taught men and women from eight years old to sixty-seven, from all walks of life. Whether it’s individually or in group classes, I approach teaching by going beyond the technical aspects of sculpting. I focus on helping students kick the control off of the left side of the brain – the side that tells you about impossibilities – over to the right.”

Robbin launched the first accredited chainsaw sculpting course in Canada where he teaches chainsaw and fine sculpture at his school, Highgate Ranch, located in the quiet rural village of Highgate, Ontario. Gabby Gamble, a retired managing director and granny to five, travelled from Victoria, Australia to study under Robbin, and says the 14,000 kilometers was well worth it. “Subtractive sculpture is unforgiving, as is the chainsaw. Robbin not only combines the two with harmony, he is able to share his exceptional skill with others.”

But how is it possible for such an extraordinary talent to lay dormant until mid-life? It’s an intriguing question that even Robbin has difficulty putting to words. “I am often asked why I didn’t start sooner, and can’t really explain it except to say I have faith in the world and believe in destiny. I am totally focused on art and the goodness of the people involved.”

“When I first started sculpting, I almost quit about six times. There was a lot of negative talk going on in my head. One time in particular, I remember being totally frustrated and pissed off at my results. And then I realized I was at a critical point. I knew I had to give ‘er everything or quit right then. So I forced myself to open that door. You know, art, like everything else in life, requires courage. But the minute you put brush to canvas, chisel to wood, you take the important first step ‘of doing’. It’s just like in the Nike ad ... Just do it!”

Author of *The Artist’s Way*, Julia Cameron says, “To be an artist is to acknowledge the astonishing. It is to allow the wrong piece in a room if we like it. It is to hang on to a weird coat that makes us happy. It is to not keep trying to be something we aren’t.” Robbin’s calling goes beyond a new career, product or business. It is the launch of a creative spirit.

To learn more about Robbin Wenzoski sculptures and Highgate Ranch contact:

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