

# Indigenous woodworking skills on display at Friends United

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KEMPT ROAD: Gerry Sheena has always had a spiritual connection with wood.

Growing up in Vancouver, B.C., his father was a logger and would come home selling of thick, rich wood everyday and that smell engrained itself in the youngster's nose.

"The smell was always there," Sheena told The Reporter. "I felt my connection was really something deep, and I just loved carving, I don't know what it is about it, I wake up every morning after 35 years, and I'm still trying to peak my interest, trying to push my envelope, trying to create something that moves you on the inside."

Sheena is a member of the Interior Salish Nation and has a traditional Salish carving style informed by modern painting techniques and innovative use of colour and design and carves masks, bowls, rattles, plaques, and various sizes of totem poles.

He met Rolf Bowman, the founder of Friends United in 2018, after they were introduced through Friend's United artist Jason Adair and invited to work on totem poles on Cape Breton Island.

"It's amazing, I go over once every morning, and they are so much further ahead then they were, and how things evolve, I have no clue how they do it, they're geniuses," Bowman told The Reporter of Sheena's and the other on-site artists' skills. "Then as they cave of course, in the middle of the wood, you'll have a knot here and a knot there, because the wood is really living, you don't know what you're going to discover on the inside, and then they need to work around that too and I just have so much respect for them."

When asked how he got into woodworking, the artist who has been finding inspiration through everything around him for the past 35-years, suggested it wasn't his first career choice, prior to beginning his own carving career in 1988.

"When I was going to school, being an artist wasn't the plan for me, because I knew my brother was a carver, my brother in-law was a carver," Sheena said. "So for me, going with my brother to sell at different art galleries, that's when I began looking in awe of all this stuff."

As he got a little older, around the time he was finishing high school, and about to go to college, he thought about becoming a businessman to open his own gallery to sell Indigenous artwork, but as luck would have it, that idea didn't pan out.

"I didn't have book-smarts, so I wasn't really that good with business or anything like that in the beginning," Sheena said. "Because art was the only thing, I ever got A's in, in school, I figured I might as well try doing something I got a little bit good at."

A gentleman from his hometown, who was already a successful artist, convinced him that, despite what people say, there is money to be made as an artist.

"Because I was in doubt. Everybody says starving artist, and was that where I really wanted to go?" Sheena said. "But I was convinced, so I went back to school and took whatever art courses I could, and learned a lot of cool mediums and techniques, but I still wasn't learning what I wanted to learn, and that was Native art."

He attended the fine arts program at Langara Community College for a two-year term as well as Emily Carr School of Art for an additional two years.

Asking his brother, who was well-known by some of the gallery owners at the time, to teach him, he was reluctantly turned down and told to get his own tools and to, like the Nike catchphrase "Just do it."



**Photos by Drake Lowthers.**  
Gerry Sheena, left, and Darren McKenzie are two of the three Indigenous artists on-site at the Fiends United Centre in Richmond County, the duo specializes in wood working, and have been creating pieces of artwork from totem poles to traditional masks.

"So that's what I did. I got myself some tools, bought books, and it's just been trial-and-error. In the beginning you copy other styles that famous artists do, and then eventually you feel comfortable with what you're doing," the mainly self-taught artist said on the artistic process. "Then you focus on your own style, and you develop yourself and it becomes your signature. You can go to any gallery and look at art and most times you can tell who's it is, just by looking at it. And that's basically where you want to get to in your career."

Sheena credits Henry McKay, an artist who is a member of the Nisga'a Nation, and his brother, Roger Swakium, as being instrumental in teaching him the basics of carving wood.

There's only one guideline Sheena, and any other wood carver for that matter, follows and that's making every single one of their cuts count as once it's gone, it's gone.

"When you're starting it, you find your centre line, so you figure out what will be your face, and then you draw a centre line all the way down the front of it," he said. "So that way, from that centre line, you can measure out your canvas to start to create balance."

Another obstacle for them on top of their creative process are the natural imperfections that present themselves in the wood material they're working with.

"You have to be very careful, especially when you carve around knots, because the grains go every-which-way," Sheena said. "We're always taught to carve towards the knot, for whatever reason, the grain favours that direction, so if you're carving away from the knot, you could pull it and a big dip could come out."

Questioned on how he can take a section of tree and conceptually visualize an outcome, the longtime artist explained when you do it enough times, you get a good idea of what you need to do and know what sections to remove.

"Every time you make a mental note of what you didn't like about a project and a way to try to improve," Sheena said. "And over the years, you become more and more happy with the end result,

but there are still pieces I find something that I will do differently in the future."

Noting these last three pieces he's completed for Friends United, has been the first time he's carved a totem pole consisting of 360 degrees of work.

"Normally, what you do is flatten out the back and you hollow it out, so for a lot of reasons it reduces the stress on the face," Sheena said. "It causes it to fracture less, and it allows them to go up against a wall. But these last ones, going all the way around is sort of a new thing for me."

Speaking on re-connecting with fellow artist Darren McKenzie in Cape Breton, has been a full-circle moment as the duo lived in the same apartment in their past.

As for the length of a project and taking a section of tree and turning it into a display-ready totem pole, could take anywhere from 10 to 12 weeks, working day-in and day-out.

McKenzie, who was born in Saskatchewan, is a member of the Cowessess First Nation initially embraced his natural artistic talents in high school under the mentorship of well-known Prairie artist, Wilf Perreault.

During this time, he developed skills as an illustrator and a painter. He later attended Medicine Hat College in 1980, majoring in commercial art. Returning home, he focused his studies on Indian Art History at the University of Regina for two years, before studying illustration and sculpture at the Ontario College of Art from 1985 to 1986.

"I met Gerry there, he lived in the same apartment as I did, he got me into carving, I went to see him carve a totem pole in his garage, and I was just sitting there watching him and I was just thinking that it would take forever to learn," McKenzie told The Reporter, of his time at the Ontario College of Art. "It was kind of intimidating to me at first, but after watching Gerry for a couple of weeks, he just gave me a piece of wood and a little knife and told me to try it and I made a little totem pole with a raven, and it turned out quite nice."

After that initial instruction from Sheena, he completed his first mask, and after it was completed, the pair attended a local gallery, and it resulted in McKenzie's first sale.

"That was the start of my career right there," he said. "I then went to a four-year apprenticeship program with wood carving; I was up there for four winters and just developed from there."

The 63-year-old, who has spent the past 30 years creating artwork credits the fact he was lucky enough to get through school.

"A lot of people figure out things through trial and error on their own," McKenzie said. "In those days there wasn't the internet, and we were kind of primitive and had to hustle, but that was a part I loved. I love the sale part of it almost as much as everything else."

He noted timewise, to produce one of his traditional masks, can take anywhere from several weeks to a number of months, depending on the masks' details.

"It will take a good month to get it all rouged out and hollowed out, to a point where you can really do the details, and do the fine tuning on it," McKenzie said. "Usually, you try to have an idea in your mind, but sometimes you don't know. Right now, I have a piece of wood outside, that I'm not sure what it's going to be yet, I know it's an amazing block of wood that has potential."

Which is almost rare artistically, he said, with not often being able to do whatever you want with your workable canvas.

"You tap into a lot of different things when you're physically involved with the artwork," McKenzie said. "There are very few disciplines that are like that, where there is physicality and spirituality, that come together to get the energy to pull that image out of that log or whatever."

For him, it's all about getting an emotional response on his final creations, which are usually positive.

In addition to Sheena and McKenzie, Eric Schweig, who is an Indigenous Canadian actor, with upwards of 40 screen credits, is best known for his role as Chingachgook's son Uncas in the epic 1992 motion picture The Last of the Mohicans, is also on-site at Friend's United creating Inuit masks.



A close-up on one of Eric Schweig's masks on display at Friends United.



One of Gerry Sheena's first totem poles he ever created for Friends United.



Another section of an almost 500-year-old tree is being turned into a wolf totem pole, and while Sheena is still early on in the process, you can start to see the rough outline of a wolf body



Multiple wooden masks are seen in different stages of production.



Wood working tools.